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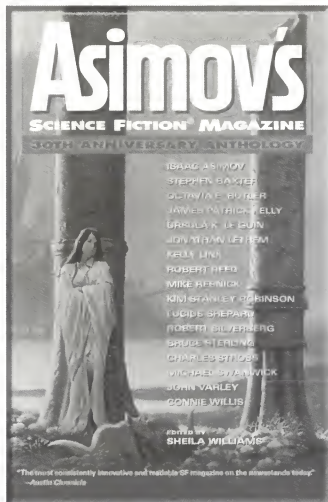


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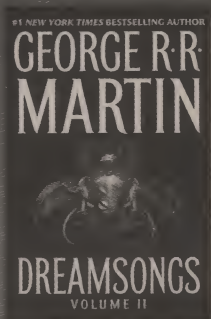
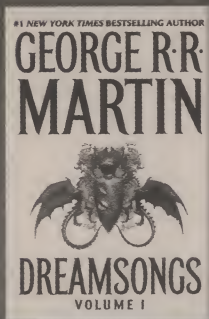
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by Jeremy Bennett

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HARRY POTTER AND THE FUTURE OF READING

On the thirty-eighth anniversary of the first manned moon landing, just as the wild celebrations of Robert A. Heinlein's centennial were beginning to quiet down, I found myself sitting on a sidewalk in New York City, awaiting the release of J.K. Rowling's seventh Harry Potter novel. I was there for two reasons: one because I'm a mother who wanted to see the book reach the waiting hands of her thirteen-year-old as close to the stroke of midnight as possible, the other because I'm a fiction editor who had to witness first hand this astonishing reception for a book.

I must confess that on that evening (a month ago as I write this editorial), and much to my daughter's dismay, I had not read any of the Harry Potter books. Until that night, my closest encounter with Harry had occurred when I was impaled on J.K. Rowling's 2001 Hugo award for *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. On that occasion, I had been accepting the Hugo Award for Kristine Kathryn Rusch's January 2000 novelette, "Millennium Babies." A lovely librarian had accepted Jo Rowling's best novel award. After photos were taken, we made our way off the stage, but, in the glaring lights, the librarian lost her footing and fell down the stairs bumping into me as she passed. Everyone quite rightly moved quickly to make sure that the librarian and the award were in good shape. I knew that my leg had been bruised, but it was

only much later in my hotel room that I discovered I'd probably left a good bit of my DNA on that Hugo.

So on this evening in 2007, I came prepared with my protective science fiction talismans. I took up my place in line at 10:30 PM with a Ted Chiang story to read and a blanket that once belonged to Isaac Asimov to sit on. Amusing events unfolded around me, just as I'm sure they did on every bookstore line in the world that night. Close to 11:30, a beautiful young woman tried to get the attractive guy ahead of me to let her into the line. He promised her good-naturedly that he would, just as long as she asked the enormous queue of people behind us if it was okay with each of them. When she responded that she just wanted *one* book, he remarked that everyone there was on line for "just one book." A cantor beside me was practicing for the next day's service. Her children tried to persuade her to sing the prayers to the theme music of the Harry Potter movies. I was amazed when she actually got the tune and sang a few lines of Hebrew. She told me that theoretically, the prayers could be sung to anything, but that she didn't think this particular selection would go over that well with some members of her congregation.

Close to midnight, I was joined by my daughter and one of her friends. They'd been comfortably ensconced in the bookstore rereading *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Sales of the new novel be-

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gan a few minutes later and, naturally, the people who'd been lined up all day were the first to be served. I watched one young man in a cloak scamper madly across Broadway waving his tome. Fortunately, there wasn't much traffic, but I couldn't prevent myself from screaming, "Don't die before you read the book!" By 12:40, though, the two girls had their own copies and were on their way to a weekend of Harry Potter books and movies, interrupted briefly, at my insistence, by a party on Saturday night in honor of Neil Armstrong's first steps on the Moon.

My daughter discovered the Harry Potter books in kindergarten. My husband read the first ones to her, but she has since listened to all the tapes and reread each book a half a dozen times. Some of her passion for Harry may have cooled, but it has been replaced by a love for many other books. When she was little, British author and editor David Langford suggested I introduce her to the fiction of Diana Wynne Jones. Her interest was not aroused when I first handed those books to her, but now that she's discovered Ms. Jones on her own, she can't get enough of her works. While my daughter is well read in most branches of fiction, her fa-

vorite fantasy authors include Phillip Pullman, Maria V. Snyder, Tanith Lee, Ellen Kushner, Jane Yolen, and Patricia McKillip. I'm indebted to writers like Scott Westerfeld for beginning to kindle an interest in science fiction as well.

My daughter has influenced other people, too. A few years ago, a young man returning from his job on Wall Street stopped me on the subway. He'd been a counselor at her elementary after-school program and he said, "I remember your daughter. I'm not much of a reader, but she got me started on Harry Potter. Tell her I'm still thankful for that."

To her delight, as the summer winds down, even I have managed to read the first four books in the series. With any luck, I'll be finished with the rest before winter. I'll be too late to join in my husband and daughter's fervent discussions about the true nature of Snape, but at least I'll know what they were talking about.

There doesn't seem to be any waning of my daughter's or her friends' interest in books. I know my evidence is only anecdotal, but I hope it's an indication that dire warnings about the death of the written word have been greatly exaggerated. ○

We welcome your letters. They should be sent to **Asimov's**, 475 Park Avenue South, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016, or e-mailed to **asimovs@delimagazines.com**. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The email address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855.

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Robert Reed

Asimov's, October/November 2006

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Asimov's, July 2006

Best Short Story

"Impossible Dreams"
Tim Pratt
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Long Form

Pan's Labyrinth

Best Dramatic Presentation:
Short Form

Doctor Who:
"The Girl in the Fireplace"

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Long Form

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Short Form

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Best Professional Artist
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Locus

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Kirsten Gong-Wong, and
Liza Groen Trombi

Best Fanzine
Science-Fiction Five-Yearly
Edited by Lee Hoffman,
Gerl Sullivan, and
Randy Byers

Best Fan Writer
Dave Langford

Best Fan Artist
Frank Wu

John W. Campbell Award for
Best New Writer
Naomi Novik

ALADDIN'S CAVE

You all remember the story of Aladdin's cave, don't you?

The magician who shows Aladdin the marble slab in the desert, with the copper ring set into it, and tells him that if he seizes the ring and raises the slab, a fabulous treasure will be his, for he alone can lift the slab. The staircase of twelve steps, leading down into a great cave in the earth. The four rooms containing gold and silver jars; the fourth room with the door leading into a garden; the trees whose fruits were rubies and emeralds; and above all else the room beyond the garden where a lamp hangs from the ceiling, the lamp of wonders that can summon the powerful spirits known as the Slaves of the Lamp, who can grant all wishes—

This is the story of my own Aladdin's Cave.

It's an episode more than half a century old that I think will stir some emotion in the bosom of anyone who, like myself of long ago, found it exciting to collect the science fiction magazines of ancient days. The year was 1950. I had just turned fifteen. I was a high-school sophomore, a voracious reader of science fiction ever since I had come upon H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* when I was about ten. I had branched out, in the previous couple of years, from such classic authors as Wells and Verne to the rather less respectable pulp magazines of the day—first *Weird Tales*, which I discovered

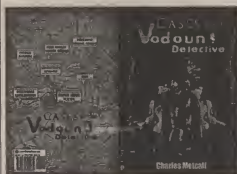
early in 1948, and then *Amazing Stories*, the following year, a magazine that I much preferred because I had the illusion that its stories were grounded in scientific speculation. (It would be another year or two before I came to see that dear old *Amazing* was just a trashy adventure-story magazine, whose stories were hardly more scientific in their orientation than the spooky fiction *Weird* traditionally offered.)

I couldn't get enough of the stuff. You know the feeling, because you went through it yourself in those first glorious months after you stumbled into reading SF. I wanted to read every bit of it I could find. There wasn't much science fiction being published then—just a handful of magazines and the very infrequent paperback. A few publishers were doing hardcover science fiction also, but of course I couldn't afford those back then (three dollars was the cover price), and when I searched for them in the public library (where they were listed under the category of "pseudoscientific fiction" they were never there, probably already having been checked out by those wiseguy seventeen-year-olds who had discovered SF a few years ahead of me. So I went hunting for the back issues of *Amazing* and its companion *Fantastic* and the gaudily named *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and the other pulp SF magazines of the era.

New York City, where I lived then, was full of shops that dealt in back-issue magazines. I was al-

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ready a regular customer of one, a musty place called Jackson's, in a seedy corner of Brooklyn, where I had gone frequently in 1947 and 1948 to buy old copies of *The National Geographic Magazine* that aided me mightily in my homework. I hustled over there and asked Jackson—a creepy old character with bristly gray stubble all over his face—about science fiction magazines. He pointed across the room. There they were, a dime apiece, and I went tottering away with a tall stack of pulps, several dollars' worth, issues going back two or three years.

But all Jackson had were the recent issues. I craved older stuff, four, five, even ten years old, issues that contained the classic stories that veteran readers still were raving about in the magazine letter columns. One day, visiting a friend who also had begun collecting SF

magazines, I noticed that the cover of one of his recent acquisitions bore the rubber-stamped address of a shop in downtown Brooklyn. It might be worth investigating, I thought. Surreptitiously—because he and I were very competitive in amassing the old magazines—I jotted down the name of the store.

I think it was called The Curio Shop, though after all this time I'm not entirely sure of that. But graven on my memory forever is its address—106a Court Street. I hustled down there after school the next day, a short trip by subway from my home.

106a Court turned out to be a decrepit nineteenth-century building just at the edge of the downtown district, three or four blocks from the county courthouse that gives the street its name. I found myself in a long, narrow, dimly lit shop, cluttered from floor to ceiling with junk of all sorts—tables and chairs,

pots and pans, bookcases, mismatched dishes, incomplete sets of silverware, and I know not what else. The proprietor, a gaunt, fierce-looking woman with grizzled gray hair, sat behind a desk just inside the front door. She gave me a quizzical look, as though wondering what a rosy-cheeked lad like me was doing in her bedraggled emporium.

I was pretty terrified. "Old science fiction magazines?" I managed to say.

"Downstairs." She pointed to a staircase dimly visible toward the back of the shop. "Watch your head going down. The light's on your left."

The staircase was a rickety affair, and I had to crouch as I descended it. Some groping and I found the light switch. A faint bulb revealed a dusty realm of floor-to-ceiling odds and ends: more of the same junk as the upstairs room held, all piled higgledy-piggledy, everything crammed closely together, with only one narrow passage permitting entry. Cautiously I advanced, squinting in the dimness. And in flimsy bookshelves tucked under the staircase I came upon the rubies and emeralds of my Aladdin's cave: heaps and heaps of science fiction magazines, some fairly recent, but most of them truly ancient ones! Dates like 1934 and 1930 and 1927 leaped out to dazzle my eyes. And not just a few magazines, but dozens—hundreds!

1934 and 1930 and 1927 must seem prehistoric to you—dates out of a time when your grandparents were little children. I assure you that those years seemed every bit as prehistoric to me, back there in 1950. Not only hadn't I been born when those magazines were new, but most of them went back to a time when my parents hadn't yet

met. For me anything before around 1941 was prehistoric—practically paleolithic.

I barely knew where to begin. Over here was a stack that turned out to be a nearly complete file, covering the years from 1930 to 1933, of *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, the remote ancestor of today's *Analog*. In astonishment I pulled forth the incredibly rare first issue, January 1930. Nearby were scores of copies of *Amazing Stories*—not the shoddy-looking pulp magazine I was familiar with, but its slick jumbo-sized forebear, founded in 1926 by the legendary Hugo Gernsback, for whom today's Hugo awards are named. Behind them were many issues of *Science Wonder Stories* and *Air Wonder Stories*, the successor magazines that Gernsback had started when a bankruptcy suit cost him control of *Amazing*, and beyond them were dozens of his later title, *Wonder Stories*, in both its pulp and slick formats. Everything was in splendid condition; some looked as though they had come straight from the newsstand. Somebody back there in the 1930s had collected science fiction magazines with zeal and had preserved them with great care, and then, perhaps, had gone off to war and never returned, and his family had sold the whole batch to The Curio Shop, where they had slumbered quietly down here until I came upon them.

Even now, seeing my teenage self darting from shelf to shelf in that congested cellar, I can feel my pulse rate rising. How I had coveted these ancient, fabled magazines! But I had never seriously expected to own them, or even just to hold them in my hands. Could I afford

to buy them, I wondered? There were hundreds of them. My allowance was perhaps two dollars a week. A month or so before I had purchased, for fifty cents, a 1929 copy of *Science Wonder Stories*, missing its front and back covers, from a mail-order dealer on Staten Island. How much would these magazines, in practically perfect condition, cost me? Whatever it was, it was surely going to be beyond my reach.

I rushed upstairs. I must have been a wild-eyed figure, flushed, perspiring, covered with dust. Trying to be cool, I inquired after the price of the magazines downstairs.

"Some are half a dollar, some a quarter," the proprietor said. "Depends on what mood I'm in when you ask."

Reader, I bought them all.

And I still have them, somewhat the worse for wear after fifty-seven years that have taken me from one end of the country to the other, but most of them still in pretty nice shape. I didn't buy them all at once, you understand. But very quickly I came to an understanding with the fierce-looking proprietor—Virginia Mushkin was her name—and her more gentle-looking husband David. They saw in me, correctly, a bright kid for whom those magazines were tremendously important—someone who was passionately in love with them, in fact—and they agreed to sell me the whole kaboodle at whatever pace I could pay for it. After all this time I have no recollection of how I raised the money—probably

through advances on my allowance—or how long it took, but in the course of time I transferred those hundreds of unthinkably rare SF magazines, two paper-bag loads at a time, from 106a Court Street to my own apartment in another part of Brooklyn. The Mushkins and I became good friends; I was a sort of an adopted son to them, and they looked on with interest as I began to write my own first science fiction stories a year or so later. They are both long dead now, but they did live on to see me become a published author.

I read those magazines, one by one. I *studied* them. Sometimes I look at them even today, though not to read, because most of the stories they contain are crude, practically unreadable things. No matter. The mere sight of them gets my heart beating faster. For me they contained the whole history of science fiction in magazine form, and I cherished them for that, and I still do. I hope you who collect old SF magazines have Aladdin's Cave stories like that, but I know you can't have any to equal this one, the discovery of long runs of 1930 *Astoundings* and 1927 *Amazings* in the basement of a cluttered, dusty old junkshop, for sale at a pittance.

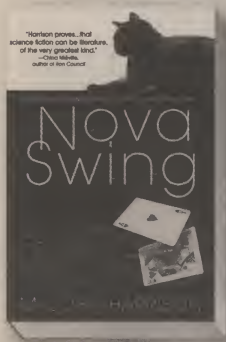
Oh—one little twist. Among the magazines I acquired there were two 1946 *Astoundings* that contained a serialized novel by the utterly forgotten writer Arthur Leo Zagat with an Aladdin angle of its own—"Slaves of the Lamp." ○

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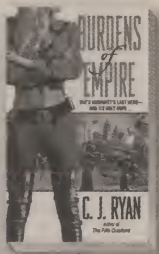
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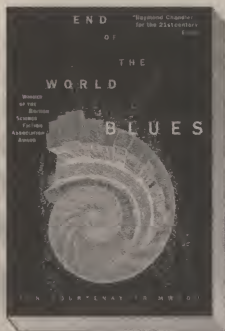


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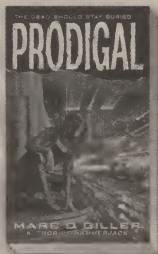
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SFWA

renewal

As I sit at my desk in the swelter of July, I have before me the form to renew my membership in the **Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America** <sfwa.org>. The cost for a year of active membership is currently seventy dollars. I should note that there is also an associate membership for new writers who have racked up just one professional sale, but are on their way to Grandmasterdom. Now I have been getting this renewal form every summer for almost thirty years and I have never once hesitated to cut the check. You see, back when I was an aspiring writer attending the **Clarion Writers Workshop** <<http://clarion.ucsd.edu>>, my mentors gave me two pieces of sage career advice: I was to subscribe to **Locus** <locusmag.com> immediately and join SFWA as soon as I qualified. It's advice I still give now that I find myself mentoring new writers.

And yet, in the last year, there has been serious criticism of SFWA from both within and without. Some well-published writers believe that it continues to be too easy to join SFWA and that it has long since ceased to be a professional writers' organization. Other members worry about the raucous-verging-on-toxic tone of the arguments that take place from time to

time in SFWA forums, some public like **SFWA's liveJournal blog** <<http://community.livejournal.com/sfwa>> and some private, like **SFF Net's** <sff.net> SFWA Lounge. Meanwhile there is a clutch of new writers who have declared that SFWA is largely irrelevant to their careers. And some who are exploring the many digital alternatives to traditional dead tree publishing are convinced that the powers that be in SFWA have their heads in a hole. I have even come across net-savvy writers who believe that **Howard Hendrix's Pixel Stained Technopeasant rant** <<http://community.livejournal.com/sfwa/10039.html>>, which we considered in the last installment, was official SFWA policy. This despite the fact that Howard made it clear he was speaking for himself only.

pros

Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I'm going to write that check once again, despite SFWA's flaws. Why? I won't dwell on those services SFWA offers to writers that are of little interest to readers of *Mov's*, other than to note that we have a committee that harries unscrupulous publishers and agents and, over the years, we have amassed emergency funds earmarked to help members in legal or medical crisis. And of course,

SFWA has stood with other writers' organizations to oppose deprecations on our rights by greedy publishing conglomerates.

Then there are the **Nebula Awards** <locusmag.com/SFAwards/Db/Nebula.html>. It should come as no surprise that determining who gets the coveted chunk of Lucite has always been controversial. Even now, the easiest way to get a rise out of the average SFWAn is to point out the many inequities that persist in the Nebulation process, despite years of tinkering with the rules. Nevertheless, while not every masterwork has been awarded the Nebula, the roster of winners is formidable; it compares very well with the corresponding list of **Hugo** <locusmag.com/SFAwards/Db/Hugo.html> winners. And a nomination to the final Nebula ballot will land a story on the front page of the *Asimov's* website, thus showcasing many up-and-coming writers to the readers of the world.

But I would especially like to draw your attention to the **SFWA website** <SFWA.org>, this being a column about the net, after all. Every SFWAn has an opinion about how our web presence might be best improved, but the fact remains that this is a truly amazing resource.

For example, consider **Members' Fiction Online** <sfwa.org/fiction>, a database of stories you can click, some of which are free and some of which you can read for a small fee. Or the comprehensive listing of **Websites of Members** <sfwa.org/links/members_a.htm>. You can peruse **selected articles** <sfwa.org/bulletin> from SFWA's print magazine *The Bulletin* and get ideas for your next read from **reading lists** <sfwa.org/reading>

suggested by prominent members. There is a modest page of **News** <sfwa.org/news> which, while not as comprehensive as that at Locus Online, often scoops other outlets, especially when the headlines have to do with SFWA. Of particular note is the **Writer Beware** page <sfwa.org/beware>, "the public face of SFWA's Committee on Writing Scams." Not only do **A. C. Crispin** <accrispin.com> and **Victoria Strauss** <sff.net/people/victoriastrauss> explore the many ways the unwary can go wrong in seeking publication, they also name the names of those who seek to take unfair advantage of trusting writers.

However, it is as a compendium of advice on best practices in the craft and business of writing in the genres of the fantastic that the SFWA website excels. Click over to the **Craft of Writing** page <sfwa.org/writing> and you will find over sixty essays. Just a few of the highlights include a how-to on hard SF world building by **Stephen Baxter** <baxterium.org.uk> and an intro to fantasy world building by the late **Poul Anderson** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poul_Anderson>. **Vonda McIntyre** <vondanmcintyre.com> shows you how to prepare a manuscript and **C.J. Cherryh** <cherryh.com> points out the mistakes of the lazy writer. And **Lewis Shiner** <lewisshiner.com> and **Bruce Sterling** <chriswaltrip.com/sterling> present the infamous Turkey City Lexicon. Meanwhile, over on the **Business of Writing** page <sfwa.org/contracts> there are model contracts for anthologies, agents, hardcovers, magazines, paperbacks, and web publishing, which have been written as guides for anyone who wants to understand common publishing

contracts with an eye to negotiating better ones.

The content on SFWA's site represents the collective wisdom of many of the genre's best writers and deepest thinkers. That it is freely available speaks to that spirit of SFWA that no one could possibly criticize. For you see, SFWA is almost entirely run by volunteers who give generously of their time and share their experience for the greater good of science fiction and fantasy.

meet the prez

The spring of 2007 was something of a roller coaster ride for SFWA. **John Scalzi** <scalzi.com> surprised everybody in the organization by announcing that he was running for SFWA's presidency—after the deadline for filing. His quixotic write-in candidacy gave a voice to those who worried that SFWA was stuck in publishing's past and who were uncomfortable with what they perceived as the culture of the organization. **Michael Capobianco** <mysite.verizon.net/michaelcapobianco>, who had served as president from 1996-98, ran on a platform that emphasized his long experience in SFWA; he proposed more cautious change that would not overburden SFWA's many volunteers. While the issues were aired by partisans in a very public and sometimes overheated debate, the two principals managed to keep their cool throughout. In the end, Michael won by a large margin. While I myself voted for John, I trust that Michael will do well by the organization. I invited him to assess the state of SFWA for us and he graciously agreed.

Do you agree that there is a perception that SFWA is irrelevant to some of the younger writers who have embraced the net?

Certainly among the most vocal of them. I think that, to some extent, the blogosphere has provided them an online community that has replaced more formal writers' organizations like SFWA. This community offers an open forum and positive reinforcement, very valuable assets. What it doesn't have is any formal mechanism for establishing goals or working for them because it's so amorphous.

If so, is that perception at all justified?

We have to distinguish between the idealized SFWA and SFWA—that-is. Because of a shortage of volunteers and lack of infrastructure and continuity, SFWA isn't nearly as effective as it could be, and it's easy to see the cracks that form as the organization's resources are stretched to the breaking point. It seems sometimes that the younger writers are more aware of the internal problems than the accomplishments. I think this is because, viewed from the outside, SFWA looks like a monolithic bastion of famous writers rather than the scrappy bunch of overworked volunteers that it is.

What can we do to change that perception?

I'm working on that right now. I predict that SFWA will change the perception by actually accomplishing things in the real world and providing members with the information they need to make informed decisions about their careers. If we do that, and make sure that our accomplishments don't get buried under the noise, the perception will change. Part of that will be to mod-

ernize and update our website, where there's a wealth of good information for members and non-members alike.

There was plenty of public nastiness on view for all the net to ponder during the recent election for President of SFWA. I did think that you and John Scalzi seemed for the most part to keep to civility in the face of rampant rudeness. That being said: What made you run for president and should the possibility . . . um . . . certainty that they will suffer personal attacks dissuade candidates from running in the future?

Thanks, I didn't find it difficult to be civil to John. I admire his ability to use the web as a promotional tool, and the hard work he's put in to keep ahead of the game. I ran for president again because a) I retired from the USPS last year and have more time, and b) I think I can keep SFWA focused on accomplishing

external goals. Finally, since I've done it before, I am conceited enough to think that I can keep the organization out of internally generated crises. It's early days, but the primary thing we can do is to carefully focus on the issues and not the personalities. Last time I was president, I found one very effective technique that helped a lot—I apologized when I was wrong. Amazing what a little apology can accomplish.

exit

I have heard it said that getting science fiction writers to agree on anything is like herding cats. But even contrarians of the feline persuasion must find common cause from time to time. All of us who believe in SFWA wish Michael Capobianco the best in his capacity as chief cat wrangler. ○

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THE PERFECT WAVE

Rudy Rucker & Marc Laidlaw

Rudy Rucker, author, mathematician, and computer-science professor extraordinaire, also edits and publishes an online SF 'zine called *Flurb* (www.flurb.net), where Marc Laidlaw is a regular contributor. Rudy is currently working on a cyberpunk trilogy in which nanotechnology augments human mental powers but threatens to destroy Earth. The first volume, *Postsingular*, appeared from Tor this fall and is also available for free download at www.rudyrucker.com/postsingular. You can stay abreast of the author's multifarious activities via his illustrated blog, www.rudyrucker.com/blog.

Marc Laidlaw, the author of *Dad's Nuke* and *The 37th Mandala*, has, for the last ten years, worked in the videogame industry as lead writer for the popular *Half-Life* series. He won the 2005 Game Developers' Choice Award for Best Writing for *Half-Life 2*.

It's a pleasant June evening in the funky California beach town of Surf City. Shadows lengthen across the state university campus, nestled amid redwoods and pastures above the town; on the bay, wetsuited surfers bob and slide on the tubes off Parker Point, their waves gilded by the setting sun.

The Boardwalk amusement park's chains of lights are coming on; squeals burst irregularly from the roller coaster. Low cars creep down the beachfront avenue, pumping beat-heavy music. Couples and families stroll about; kids play in the yards of the grimy pastel homes in the side streets off the Boardwalk; skaters grind and flip along railings, stoops and curbs. Borne upon the cool evening breeze, the smells of grease and oregano waft from a waterside warehouse restaurant.

The establishment's marquee displays a long-snouted grinning cartoon rat holding a surfboard and an oversized slice of pizza, the slice flopping down to drip a cheese-strand onto the rat's gnarly bare toes. The rat wears a top hat and a long red T-shirt labeled C.R. The marquee sign reads:

*Cheezemore Ratt's Surf Shack
Pizza, Games, and Family Fun!
Yes, We Have "The Perfect Wave"®™*

A tall, skinny young man with a shock of straight platinum blond hair is spraypainting a mural onto a concrete block wall facing the mostly empty parking lot, the mural potentially visible to the cars trolling the beachfront avenue. The painter is Zep: avid surfer, amateur scientist, temporarily unhoused. His recently acquired companion Kaya sits on the ground, smoking cigarettes, drawing in an art-quality notebook, and admiring him. She wears a carved black coral tiki-goddess head on a Day-Glo red string around her neck.

Zep is handsome, in a street-worn, unshaven way. Kaya wears her hair in a blonde Bettie Page bob—or, no, that's not her hair, it's a wig. Her eyebrows are shaved off and replaced by fanciful drawn-on lines. Her face is young, her front teeth large and rabbity. She wears a flowing paisley pashmina-size scarf across her shoulders against the cooling evening air.

Resting beside Kaya are three cartons of spray-paint cans, and next to the cartons are the couple's freshly spraypainted bicycles, fat-tire beaters with stuffed saddle bags. Zep's bike is now green, Kaya's yellow. A garish science fiction novel and a computer science textbook peep from Zep's saddlebags, also a soldering iron and a voltmeter. Visible in the open tops of Kaya's bags are a Tarot deck, the brass stalk of a pocket bong, a plastic Ziploc bag of granola, a tea-kettle spout, the corner of a silky purple sleeping bag, also pliers and a screwdriver. Kaya's bicycle has a tiny motor jury-rigged to its rear wheel, with a little cylinder of gas connected to the motor.

Zep's bicycle has a rack welded to one side, and snugged into the rack is his peculiar translucent gray surfboard, with an irregular dark shape embedded within its center. The board's surface is rough and sticky. It, too, has been recently decorated by the spray-can: the name "Chaos Attractor" rainbows across it in loose script.

Zep has already covered the concrete-block wall with a blue sky background dotted with red-tinged white clouds. And now, holding a dirty handkerchief over his mouth with one hand, he dances along the wall, swinging a can of green spray-paint up and down in great arcs—limning the requisite image of a perfect wave.

"Slower," said Kaya in a gentle tone. "Don't rush it, Zep."

"I want transparency," says Zep through his handkerchief. "So the sky shows through. I'll build up the base of the wave one layer at a time." He jitters back and forth till the can is empty, selects a fresh can, begins shaking it, and hunkers down by Kaya's side.

Kaya shows her notebook to him. "Look, I figured out how to position Cheezemore Ratt on a board. You're lucky you met me yesterday, huh?"

Surprise: the pages of Kaya's notebook are completely covered with as-

tounding da Vinci-like drawings: a flow diagram of the air currents inside a cloud, a schematic for a small motor of novel design, a sketch of a twin-peaked quantum wave function, an image of Zep as a skeleton, and a fetching sketch of Kaya riding down the face of an enormous wave.

"Whoa," says Zep. "I'm flabbergasted."

"You still don't remember me?"

"What."

"We were in the same physics class freshman year, before you dropped out."

"That makes you what, a junior now?"

"I never forgot you, Zep. Summer's here, and you're my summer project. Why do you think I pitched my tent by yours on the beach?" Kaya turns her face up at Zep, expecting a kiss, but he backs off, spooked, frantically shaking the spray-can.

"To be inside the radius of my awesome electronic sand flea disintegrator?" he says, not looking at her. "Maybe someday I can use the profits to buy a house."

"You're scared now? After last night?" says Kaya.

"You're stalking me?" says Zep.

"Chasing happiness," says Kaya, looking sweet in the fading light. "And I love talking physics with you. I'm writing a term paper about how the planetary wave function can change modalities and cohere into a fresh solution. About how the entire Earth can change."

"All these threads at once," says Zep, picking up a second spray-can and shaking the two cans at the same time. "What if I just put pieces of pizza on the wave. Hella easier to draw than Cheezemore Ratt and his Slicers."

"Triangles!" says Kaya. "The elemental form. Good idea, Zep."

Zep looks at her for a minute and comes to a decision. "Paint this with me, Kaya. You're a better artist than me. Frankly, I'm worried about that wave I just started. It's not epic. It needs—oh, of course!"

Zep sets down his paint cans to fiddle with his surfboard Chaos Attractor. The surface lights up with pale green scrolls that form a realtime graphical model of a wavy water surface as seen from above, with the water-heights coded as shades of green. The tints of green flow like sun and shadows on a wind-tossed harbor, but there's something odd about the flow, something nonlinear, and now odd square-spiral waves begin rotating within the stew, sending out shockwaves of altered behavior.

It's Kaya's turn to be surprised. "Your surfboard's a computer? I heard rumors but—how does it work?"

"That dark shape in the core, where it looks like a shark skeleton? That's a vintage CAM8 cellular automaton machine. My good stick Chaos Attractor can not only simulate the state of the nearby sea, it can also propagate realtime tweaks into the surfspace at large, which means that, when I'm jamming the tubes, my moods can influence them. And when we're dry-docked like this, I can use my board to simulate imaginary oceans. That's what we're seeing now. A boiling cubic wave equation. See how it wobbles out those bulges that gobble up the square corners?"

"That's your mood?" says Kaya, tapping the surface of the board. "Oh, look, you feel me!" Oblong scrolls percolate out from her touches, blend-

ing with the jerky molten motions of the cubic waves. "I like you a lot, Zep."

Zep freezes the simulation and walks to the wall with his cans of paint. "Grab a pair of cans and jam with me, Kaya. As soon as we're done copying this image we can go into the Surf Shack to stuff our guts."

"And talk about our future," adds Kaya.

Despite what one might expect for a kiddie pizza parlor, Cheezemore Ratt's Surf Shack is a place of peace. It's the audio ambience that makes the difference. The great room is wired to play the natural sounds of breaking waves, sprinkled with seabird skirls. Also woven into the mix are faint, sweet strands of surf music, and not hackneyed old crap—no, it's offbeat procedural surf music that no one's ever heard, the music mixed down low enough so that it fades in and out like a party you're hearing from a quarter mile down the beach. The room's air is fresh, with high windows open to the breeze off the bay. Children race in circles around a central clump of booths where their parents enjoy pitchers of imported beer.

Yes, the floor is sticky with spilled sodas, shiny from discarded pizza scraps, and gritty with cast-off kernels from the bowls of free pretzels and popcorn. And every so often a child falls heavily and breaks into screams—but never for long. The Surf Shack is an oasis of calm, the vibe-equivalent of an actual beach.

Cheap, free-access videogames line the wall on the room's right side, their speakers turned way down so as not to clash with the pulse of the surf and the chiming of the surf music. Along the left side of the room are the pizza and drink counters. And at the far end of the room is the entrance door to The Perfect Wave, a high-end networked virtual reality cave with a few hydraulically jacked surfboards. Riding The Perfect Wave costs seventeen bucks for a five-minute pop, ten minutes for thirty bucks. It's popular enough that sometimes there's a line to get in. There's another Perfect Wave cave down on the Boardwalk, but that one's too heavily frequented, it's like a worn-out public restroom.

Del works behind the pizza counter; he's a short young fellow with a plain, honest face. He serves a man a slice of Cheezemore's Hawaiian pizza: roasted fresh pineapple, Serrano ham, and locally made mozzarella topped with roasted Kona coffee beans—then turns to smile at the girl beside him filling a pitcher with dark beer. Both of them are wearing top hats like Cheezemore Ratt, with little pins saying Slicer.

"Almost closing time, Jen," says Del. "You want to stick around? Mr. Prospero said I could play The Perfect Wave free all night if I'd mop the place. That's hundreds of dollars worth of play-time. I'm really moving up the tournament ladder. You could watch me play."

"How do you surf on a ladder?" says Jen absently. "Anyway, sorry, I need to get out of this box." She's cute with high blonde pigtails, though her face is drawn. Her bloom of youth is fading, with only work in sight.

"I think it's fun here," says Del. "Working next to you every day. When are you off this week?"

"Monday."

"Damn, I'm only free on Tuesday. Maybe I can change to Monday and we can take a picnic out to Bitchin Kitchen beach where Zep's camped out. Surf the day away."

"I'm malling on Monday," says Jen. "I have to find a dress for Zep and Kaya's wedding."

"Wedding!" said Del. "Zep only met her yesterday."

"Oh, she's known him a long time," says Jen. "He has such a bad memory. She's been, like, tracking him, and now she's finally hooked up with him, and she's using astrological birth control, and you know what that means." Jen arches her back, grins and pats her stomach. "Wedding in July!"

"Good thing Zep got Mr. Prospero to hire him for the mural," says Del, shaking his head. "He's gonna need an apartment, or at least a room. Poor guy. He has this impossible dream of buying a beach cottage."

"Kaya's really rich," says Jen. "Doesn't he know that? She plans for Zep to finish college. Do you think Zep will thrash his mural? How did he even convince Mr. Prospero that he could paint?"

"Day before yesterday Zep showed Prospero some mural pictures in a book from the library and claimed he'd done them under a pseudonym," says Del with a snicker. "You know Zep. He can fake anything. And it's not like Prospero's paying him very much. Prospero's always so broke—for a guy who runs a business."

There's a sudden squawk outside on the sidewalk, the sound of voices raised. Kaya is cursing at someone, and that someone, a guy whose voice raises the hairs on Del's neck, is cursing her back. Abruptly the man's voice rises to a frantic bellow. Zep comes tear-assing in through the door with its tiny tinkling bell. Close on his heels is a big guy with an ill-favored, somewhat triangular form. Del knows the silhouette from high school corridors and adolescent nightmares.

"Lex Loach," he mumbles, casting a sidelong glance at Jen. He's shocked to see her straighten, pull back her pixie pigtails, and smooth down her Cheezemore Ratt-faced apron.

"Hi, Lex!" she chirps perkily.

Zep tosses Del the can of red spray-paint he's carrying, then vaults the bar and reaches under the counter, pulling out the lead-filled billy club that Mr. Prospero keeps by the cash register. Zep taps the club against his palm, glaring at Loach, who's holding a can of black spray-paint.

"Yo, Jen," says Loach, dropping his pursuit of Zep and giving his spray-can a maraca shake. "You about ready?"

Kaya comes in the door now too. "Hey, crackwipe! What the quap did you just do? You think you can get away with that?" She's carrying her paisley pashmina scarf by one corner; it's all smeared with red paint.

A mother at a nearby table grabs her highly interested toddler and leaves. In any case, the place is nearly empty by now.

Loach slips into a stool at the bar, ignoring both Zep and Kaya. He sets his spray-can down and flashes Jen a sunny grin. "Maybe I'll have a beer before we go."

"I'm talking to you, butt-face," says Kaya, right at his side.

"Chill, Kaya," snaps Jen. "Lex is my friend."

"Friend?" squeaks Del.

"Jen!" says Kaya. "This turd sprayed black paint all over Zep's mural!"

Loach shrugs. "Just wanted to save myself having to clean an even bigger mess off that parking lot wall in a week or two when the sale of this place goes through. No point putting any more work into it, Zeppo."

Zep smacks the billy club evenly into his palm.

"No point flipping out either," continues Loach. "You see me gettin' mad? I could get mad. You sprayed a friggin' pig face on the hood of my SPC. But thanks to a little turpentine and your stoner girlfriend's do-rag, I'm willing to let it go. Just don't come out from behind that counter, bat-boy."

"I've heard enough," says Kaya and stalks outside.

The smell of burning pizza crust registers upon Del. He reaches for the big wooden paddle. "What sale?" he quickly gets in.

"Prospero didn't tell you, huh?" gloats Lex. "He's in denial. Fact is, he's selling this place to my Dad, yo. Gonna install a Snack-Fac right here. Give the Boardwalk tourists something they can relate to. Not like this space-case Cheezemore Rattshit scene you got here now." He glances over at the Perfect Wave cave and snickers. "You play that big bad surf game, Del? You a heavy dude in the virtual world?"

"Don't make fun of Cheezemore Ratt," says Del with simple dignity. "He's vibby. Just like Mr. Prospero. And, yes, I have the number two Perfect Wave ranking in Surf City. My Perfect Wave handle is El Surfiño."

"You just tell that to everyone?" says Loach, shaking his head as if pitying Del's naiveté. And then he reverts to his usual warty demeanor. "It's not fair you get all that free time on the Perfect Wave machine here. Maybe I'll have my Dad move that rig to our house while we're steam-cleaning the stink outta this hole."

"Let's have our beer at the Boardwalk," says Jen to Loach, hanging up her apron. She flashes Del a smile that lifts him for a second. "Del, since you're staying late, will you close out for me?"

Stiff-faced, he says, "Uh—sure." And turns to slide out the darkened extra pizzas with the paddle. The special after-hours snack he'd planned to share with Jen. The Surf Shack's lights flicker twice. Closing time.

Still holding that billy club, Zep follows Loach and Jen outside. Knowing that Zep is weaponized, Loach chooses to ignore him. Kaya is standing in the lot looking happy again. It's night now, with a low full moon's light dancing on the ocean waves. A few blocks away, the Boardwalk amusement park roars.

Kaya watches Lex let himself into his dad's Suburban Personnel Carrier, leaving Jen to haul on the massive slab of passenger door as if she's opening a bank vault. The behemoth rolls away.

"I can work that slash-mark into my composition," remarks Zep, calmly studying his defaced mural. "I can have the picture be showing a quantum transition where one version of reality shifts into another. On the left side I'll have pizza slices on a normal-type wave, and on the right side I'll have, um, Easter Island moai gods on a boiling cubic wave. Like that tiki god you wear on your neck. Tikis are easy to draw. No arms and legs."

"She's a goddess, not a god," says Kaya, fingering her amulet. "But—if

Loach says his father is buying this place, why bother finishing the mural?"

"I'll get paid just the same," says Zep. "No effort's ever in vain. And who knows, maybe my mural can jujitsu the deal into falling through. Anyway, half the time Loach is talking out of his ass."

A muffled thud sounds a couple of blocks away, followed by a crowd's burst of applause and laughter.

"Could be the Loach family is in for a run of bad luck," says Kaya, dimpling. "Could be they're losing their wave."

"You spiked that pig's gas tank?" says Zep.

"His carb and spark-plug," says Kaya. "I set it up to explode like a bomb. I've forgotten more about motors than most men will ever know. What do you say we move all our stuff inside the Surf Shack and lie low?"

"I'm down with that," says Zep.

Delbert's desultory mopping is done, along with the counting out. Zep, Del, and Kaya have the whole Shack to themselves, the lights dim, the doors and windows shuttered and locked, infinite beer on tap and the two burned eggplant-and-anchovy pizzas that Del made.

They're sitting at a table, smoking Kaya's bong, with plangent surf music playing on low. Kaya extends her tongue; it's smarting from molten mozzarella.

"You actually blew up Loach's dad's car's engine, Kaya?" says Del, finishing his beer. "You're too cool. Maybe you really should marry Zep."

"Dude!" exclaims Zep, shocked. "Where's that at? Next topic, man. Tell us about that Perfect Wave game you've been talking about."

"I'm farming waves," says Del. "What it is, all the Perfect Wave game installations are networked. There's five standard courses, and once you've mastered them, you get to design new breaks of your own. The way to really improve your ranking is to build a break that you can totally slyve, but which sends all the other guys over the falls."

"Guys?" puts in Kaya, exhaling a plume of smoke. "No women?"

"He was using 'guys' in the gender-neutral sense, Kaya," puts in Zep.

"Were you, Del?" probes Kaya, her eyes bright under her blonde wig and weirdly curved hand-drawn eyebrows.

"Oh what-frikkin-ever," says Zep. "You are so—"

"Guys and *women*," says Kaya. To lighten this she passes Del the bong.

"I'd love to see you marry Zep," Del tells Kaya, gratefully accepting the pipe. "Whip his skanky ass into line. Anyway, I was talking about my progress up the Perfect Wave tournament ladder. I've got this awesome new point break I designed, Zep, and the only one who can handle it without wiping out is Lova Moore. She's in slot numero uno on the Surf City Perfect Wave rankings."

"Lova Moore?" says Zep, liking the stripper-type name. "Do I know her?"

"I've never seen her face to face," says Del. "But her personal profile says she's a twenty-year-old woman, just moved to Surf City from Minnesota. Her body icon is hot, but she's really rude. She claims she's a farmer's daughter and that she learned to play Perfect Wave in the cave

installed in, like, the Mall of America. You know—way inland.” They all shudder simultaneously at the thought of being a thousand miles from the nearest ocean shore.

“Amerikkka with three K’s,” says Kaya, refilling the bong. “I hate consumerism. That’s why I sleep on the beach.”

“My goal is to get *off* the beach,” says Zep. “Some of us don’t have a choice.”

“I thought you were on the beach because you’re stalking Zep,” Del says to Kaya. He’s getting a little sick of her interruptions. “That’s what Jen told me.”

“Can we please just talk about surf algorithms,” says Zep unhappily. “No more social dynamics. The Perfect Wave, Del. How many fake boards are in that little room?”

“Three,” says Del, standing up. “You ready?”

“Me too,” says Kaya, snugging down her wig.

The Perfect Wave cave is a dome-like enclosure with a cushioned floor and three surfboards mounted upon swiveling hydraulic jacks augmented by squiddy sprawls of secondary and tertiary pistons fastened lamprey-like to their undersides and skegs. Wave sounds fill the dome, whose inner surface is seamlessly covered with projected images of a surfy sea. The boards are parallel just now, with Del in the middle, Zep on the left, and Kaya on the right. Del leans rhythmically back and forth, leading the others through a series of low waves and out to a rocky point with barking seals. Thanks to the exquisite aquahaptics of the boards, Del feels the currents, chop and eddies within the computations.

“I built this break,” he says. “I call it Monster Mash. Look out!”

An improbably big wave spins off the tip of the point, growing larger at an accelerating rate. Working on instinct, Zep hunches and leans, spinning his board to the left to slide off down the long part of the onrushing breaker.

“Don’t go that way!” yells Delbert. “It’s a trap!”

But Zep ignores him and drags the virtual reality his way. Seemingly the display is slaved to follow the moves of whichever surfer manages to get out in front of the others. Working hard to catch up, Del slides down the virtual wave in Zep’s wake. As for Kaya—her board bucks and dumps her laughing onto the floor.

And now the reason for Del’s warning becomes clear. They’re racing down the tube toward, oh god, a gnarly barnacle-encrusted pier with barbed wire strung between the pilings. Moving with surprising grace, Del gets ahead of Zep and snaps his board around to lead them back toward the initial rocky point.

“Tubeleader Aspect!” Del shouts, and Zep finds his board sliding gracefully around to fall in behind Zep; it’s as if he’s acquiring Del’s procedural exit from the trap. Del knows a special gamer hole in the wave, a hollow tunnel of surf. He flashes in there, wearing a beatific goofy smile, all worries about Jen and Lex temporarily gone. Zep slides along in Del’s wake, glad to see his friend happy.

They end up on a sandy shingle beside a mother seal nursing a pup.

Zep plops down on the floor beside Kaya. “So, Del,” he says. “Nobody

from Surf City can ride Monster Mash but you and—what was her name?”

“Lova Moore from Minnesota,” says Del. “Nobody but her and me and, well, now you.”

“Good going, Zep,” says Kaya. “You rule.”

“Aw, Del showed me the way. I was about to get us all hung up on barbed wire.”

“Actually, you can get a quad bonus for making it through the wire safely,” says Del. “But I didn’t think we’d want to try that on your first run. Maybe later. I’ll show you something else now.”

There’s an alphanum toepad at the nose of each board. Del taps out a code with the big toe of his left foot.

“Get ready to ride—*people!*”

“That’s better,” says Kaya, and mounts her board.

Around them, the ocean shore shimmers and warps. They’re a few hundred yards off a new coastline, facing out to the sea. The ocean seems to curve up forever, a bowl of blue mounting into the mists around a gleaming little sun directly overhead.

“Where’s the horizon?” says Kaya.

“This is the Pellucidar break,” says Del, as if that’s an explanation. “I love this place. It feels so safe and cozy to be living on the inside.”

“The Hollow Earth!” exclaims Zep, who’s read the same low-brow books as Delbert. “How bitchin’ is that? Look at the whales!”

In the distance, four huge whales have breached from the sea and are beating their great tails against the air, sweeping a path through the mists, their mouths agape, seining insects and floating orchids from the teeming inner sky of the Hollow Earth. With a final fillip of their flukes, they arc hugely toward a sky-high spot in the Hollow Earth’s concave sea.

Looking toward shore, Zep smiles at how the shorebreak rises on both sides. “This is like the ultimate tube,” he says. “Imagine being in here all the time.”

“The Hollow Earth is the best break of all,” enthuses Delbert. “I wish it were real. All the high-ranking players hang here.”

Bobbing all across the great blue dome are dots that resolve if you stare at them for more than a second. Each is a person on a board—an idealized representation of that person’s surfer persona—dark sunbronzed figures, many of them covered with lurid tattoos and the occasional corporate logo. Most don’t bother modeling wetsuits, since the water in the sim is always perfect. But more than a few have given themselves the features of sea creatures: seal-like snouts, shark fins, whiskery lionfish spines. Their names and other identifying marks circle their heads like translucent halos. Del’s game name EL SURFIÑO floats over him, while Zep and Kaya are labeled N00B1 and N00B2. Zep tries to tap out the first obvious commands on his toepad, but whatever he’s done merely makes the world spin until it feels like they’re hanging upside down.

“Stop . . . it . . . before . . . I . . . hurl!” says Kaya.

Del stabilizes the scene. “What’re you trying to do, Zep?”

“Zoom on one of those surfers. Or enter a name search.”

“You know someone in here?”

"Only by repute. Your girlfriend Lova Moore."

"Not a girlfriend," says Del. "Not even a friend. She's very aggro. But, yeah, I've got her on my foe-list. Sec." One toe-tap, and suddenly they're in deep water. No shoreline in sight, jus the boundless bowl of blue, with the immobile Inner Sun still shining down.

Nearby is a surfer woman with the mandatory shock of sunbleached hair. She has pouty red lips, brilliant blue eyes, wide hips, and enormous naked boobs. And, surfer goddess that she's supposed to be, she sports a deep tan and a sand-scrape on her right cheek. Her name-halo says, "LOVA MOORE." The name is accompanied by a constellation of award logos and content rankings. Spotting Del, she pulls up a flashing mermaid tail and coils it around herself, sitting poised on her board to watch him glide closer.

"Nice butt-fin," says Zep. "Must make it hard to work your keypad."

"You're bringing newbies in here, Surfiño?" Lova asks Del. "That's a hel-la cheap way to get points." Despite her beauty, she has an unpleasant, callow voice, made a bit shrill and distorted by sound processing.

"N00B1 and N00B2 are pals of mine, Lova," says Del. "I'm showing them the breaks."

"I've unlocked everything in your cheesy Monster Mash, El Surfiño," says Lova with a flip of her tail. "Got anything that's not totally stale?"

"For sure my brah El Surfiño is twisting up a fresh joint," volunteers Zep. "A gnarly break that'll blow you right outta the Surf City tournament tree, dip-twit."

Del casts Zep a surprised look. "I—I—

"As if," says Lova, hefting her boobs like six-shooters. "Surfiño's my puppy dog."

"Ah, but I'm gonna help Del program his new break," brags Zep, tapping his skull. "Got math? I'm hatching the gnarliest wave ever seen. Let's close out this chitchat and actualize my vision, Del."

But Lova doesn't want to let them go. "Oh, his name is Del now?" she says mockingly. "Not El Surfiño? Hard to say which handle is groovier. I've heard of a Del who—" She breaks into a chirping guffaw. And now her attention turns to Zep. "How about you, N00B1? I don't see that you've been in a single Perfect Wave competition."

"He's an indigenous Surf City local!" says Kaya, coming to Zep's defense. "Not an invasive toxic slime Great Lake geoduck."

"Gooley duck?" Lova narrows her eyes and glides close to Kaya. "You're trying to be N00B1's bitch, *hmmm*? I think you're a slumming yuppie larva."

"Don't trip on me," says Kaya. "You got no idea how rough I am."

"Oooo," says Lova. "Some surf-rats, they'd wreck a guy's car engine if he even looked at them wrong. But you'd never get *that* real, would you, N00B2?"

"Oh yeah?" cries Kaya. "That's exactly what I did a half hour ago! I pulled loose a spark plug in some crackwipe's SPC and rigged his carb to spray an explosive mist of fuel! *Thud, clank, meow-boom-boom!* Game over."

"Maybe I'll share that info," says Lova. "Skeevy slushed stoners." She speeds off, churning the water with her ample tail.

The sim closes down and they're standing in the musty, carpeted dome of the Perfect Wave cave.

"Man, Zep," complains Del. "Why did you have to be so rude to her?"

"Rude? Dude, you gotta learn to fight back."

"But Lova is so—so stacked. I always lose my head."

"She's a computer graphic run by a horrible person," says Kaya. "Jen's the one you should be thinking about. An actual no-implants woman that you physically know. I'm gonna go by the Food Bin and get some betel-nut energy tea from my friend Becka. She's on the night shift. See you in a little while, kay, Zep?"

"KZEP: the call letters of the gods."

Kaya puts her bong in her pocket and sashays out of the cave and through the empty restaurant. Zep follows her as far as the front door, harkening to the teeming summer beach night outside: the hiss of the cars with their headlights raking by, the music and laughter from down the block, the rattle and thrum of the Boardwalk rides, and always the calm oceanic pulse of the surf.

"Come on back, Zep," nags Del, peering out of the Perfect Wave dome. "I'll show you the programming interface now. All we have to do is get on our boards and say, 'Design Mode.'"

"Kind of sucks to be in a room inside a room, doesn't it?" says Zep, sullenly returning to his place on the fake surfboard. "How'd you get into something so dinky, man?"

"*Design Mode*," says Del insistently.

The surfscape gives way to a virtual laboratory. The dome is tessellated with maybe a thousand holographic surf-break animations. A fanciful virtual console encircles the lower part of the wall, all brass and mahogany, with heavy-duty Victorian dials, levers, and knobs.

"To start with, you can point out some of the breaks that you like, and the design wizard spawns off variants," says Del. "Blends and crossovers. Or you can just tweak the individual surf-breaks with your bare hands—" He reaches right into a point break and bends the rocky spit of land a bit further to the right. "And down by the floor we have the lab-type controls." Del moves a slider, making the crests of the waves in the active breaks grow about 30 percent higher.

"Can I input an equation?" asks Zep. "Is there, like, a programming language?"

"There's, uh, some kind of display over there," said Del, pointing out a round glassy screen filled with glowing green symbols. "I think there's a keyboard. I've never used it."

Zep crouches over the round screen, watching its reactions to the twitches of his fingers on the virtual keyboard, a fanciful construct of copper and ivory.

"No prob!" Zep soon exclaims. "The system uses this easy reverse Polish language called Whuffo. I'll just change your water's physics to use the boiling cubic wave equation—there. And now we pimp our ride. Lova Moore's gonna be sucking sea urchins."

Sooner said than done. Two hours roll by before the boys get a crude first approximation working, a crusty break with staircase-shaped waves.

Unlike in the Hollow Earth break, there's no sun in their design-mode world; the air simply glows. The waves hump out of the acid-green virtual water like wobbly escalator treads. The square blocks swell as they rise, ballooning into prickly-pear-cactus lop-lop shapes, and if one of those lop-lops bursts near your head, you're off your board for true.

"We'll call this break Wobble Gobble," exults Zep. "It's almost as gnarly as I dreamed." He shows Del a virtual control that he's fashioned: a numerical read-out with a thumb-wheel. "To keep it interesting, I can dial up the gain as high as I like. I've got it set on eleven right now. But it can go way higher. I'm using a logarithmic scale."

"Eleven is enough," says Del. His board keeps pitching him onto the floor.

"Here's the trick," advises Zep. "After each wobble, there's a flat spot that you can slide across before that big cactus bulge grows out to gobble you." He's wildly twitching his board, like a salmon climbing a fish-ladder. His face is sweaty and his damp hair lank. "Come on, Del, don't lie there like a noob. You gotta master this so you can shut down Lova Moore."

In another half hour Del has the hang of it. "Wobble Gobble!" he says. "Nice work, Zep. I'll spiff up the break now." He adds dolphin-shaped non-player-characters, steep-sided stone islands, tree ferns onshore and, just for the hell of it, a dinosaur-sized kiwi bird that wades around trying to eat stuff. And then Del flips back to play mode and messages Lova.

"I've decided to call the cops on N00B2," shrills Lova Moore, appearing almost right away. "Malicious automotive mischief. I know her true name, too."

"Man, what kind of surfer are *you*?" cries Zep. "Goody-goody snitch. Back to the Heartland with you!"

"Never been there," says Lova, sitting next to them on her board, her giant boobs jiggling as she studies the kinky Wobble Gobble waves. "In reality, I'm a Surf City local."

Even now the breast-besotted Del fails to reach the obvious conclusion. Mainly he's focused on showing off his break. And Zep is too busy grooving on the cubic waves to realize that Lova Moore has blown her cover.

"Stairway to heaven!" shouts Del as he fish-twitches his board across a mound of ziggurat-like cubic waves, then slides down them with thuddy, smacking sounds, ducking the flying water-balloons overhead.

Lova tries to follow him, but she's not doing well. Over and over she wipes out and then, how sweet, the monster kiwi eats her virtual surf-board and she's left paddling in the chop with ripple rings radiating out from her neck. The schools of dolphins flip their tails and leap for joy. Lova's ranking has dropped by about 10 percent, enough to put her well below Del's level.

And then Lova notices the gain controller in Zep's hand.

"Cheaters!" she screeches. "You'll pay for this!" She disappears.

"The standard gain of eleven is pretty easy," Zep tells Del, a smile playing across his lips. "That's why every time that it looked like Lova was settling in on a wave, I goosed the gain up to a hundred."

"Zep, that's not—"

"Hell, if she deserved to have the top ranking, she could have handled the higher-gain waves. I bet you can even surf a gain of a *thousand*, Del. Check it out." Zep twiddles his control.

Fat goutts of hyperactive water fly across the walls. The mounted surfboards are like bucking dragons. But the boys learn these rhythms too, and Zep keeps on inching the gain higher. It's fun.

And now here comes Kaya, hurrying in from the intricate night, her flip-flops slapping the floor, her cheeks flushed. Somewhere during the evening's changes she's set aside her blonde wig, revealing cropped mousey brown hair with a tiny braided pigtail in back. "Wuxtry, wuxtry!" she cries, newsboy style. "Lova Moore is Lex Loach!"

"*Ga-hoink!*" ape-screams Del, slapping his forehead and falling off his board.

"I wasn't attracted to Lova Moore for one second," Zep is quick to put in.

"Blinded by boobs," says Kaya, shaking her head. "Moronized by mammarys. Titillated by—grow up, boys. They're just glands. What it is, I was hanging with Becka at the Food Bin for a couple of hours, catching a betel buzz, and then Jen comes wandering in, bored out of her skull. She says Lex is pissing away the evening at that trashed Perfect Wave cave, the one on the Boardwalk. So I'm like, *hmmm*, and we jam over there and find Lex lying on the floor, he's just wiped out on your Wobble Gobble break. So of course I'm harshing on him about playing Lova Moore—but then he says if I don't stop, he'll call the cops on me for his shitbox car! So I act nice for about ten seconds, but then he puts his hands on me, so I say why try to be butch when you're such a queen, and he calls his dad and gets permission to take immediate possession of Cheezemore Ratt's and cut the power! What it is, he's gonna shut you down."

Zep has a workaround. "If I crank up the gain to an insane level, I think the Wobble Gobble break can draw power from the ambient wireless radiation," he says. "Thanks to the entropy gradient. That way Loach can't shut us down. Macho Lex with his triple-K cups." Zep is pumping his thumb to move his virtual controller's wheel. "I'm setting it to ten thousand, Del."

"Are you freaking nuts?" cries Del, as the virtual water begins rearing into frantic spouts.

"Ten thousand degrees of weirdness is just where it starts gettin' good," says Zep, taking an unsteady stance on his rapidly twitching board. Del has no choice but to join in.

They can hear Loach bellowing outside. He's unlocking the electrical cabinet, turning off the Cheezemore Ratt circuit-breakers one by one. The lights wink out across the room. But the Perfect Wave cave stays alive. Yes! The high-entropy simulation is drawing energy from the global funk of wireless info waves. If anything, the sim images are brighter than before.

Loach pounds into the restaurant and snatches up the billy-club from behind the bar.

"Oooo, Wova wikes to wub the wood," whoops Kaya, standing by the Perfect Wave dome. With a shriek of laughter she nips inside.

"And now get on your board," Zep tells her. "We gotta jam!"

"I'm too high to surf those humpty water eggs," says Kaya. The bright shapes are coming loose from the walls, the air itself is dancing with globs. "I'll just sit on the back of your board, Zep. Oooo, here comes Wova Woach!"

Hoarsely roaring, Loach is beating the club over and over against the dome of the Perfect Wave cave, breaking down the walls.

"We're going all the way to a million now," says Zep, sweating and bending over his virtual controller. "We'll be drawing in even more stuff from the outside world."

"The perfect wave," raves Kaya. "You're gonna crank up the uncertainty of the planetary wave so high that we'll end up somewhere totally—" She breaks off, suddenly concerned, holding her hand to her throat. "My tiki string just snapped! I heard my little goddess bounce off your board." Kaya lies on her stomach across Zep's chintzy wave cave board, peering at the floor.

A piece of the dome breaks loose and—melts. The cubic wave simulation is absorbing material reality. The dome, the nearby tables and chairs and even the walls of the restaurant merge into the growing blue wave.

Loach throws himself through the warped, glowing air, grabbing for the third board. And misses—just. But he's made it into the pudding intact; he's power-paddling like a merman.

Del, Zep, and Kaya slide away, Del in the lead. The world is hanging sideways, like a wall whose floor is a million miles below. They're surfing across a washboard of shelf-like ripples on the face of the vertical wave—and they keep getting higher, climbing the wave like stripes on a barber pole.

Del looks back past Zep and Kaya, wondering if his procedural kiwi bird is still in place. The kiwi is nowhere in sight—it's been replaced by a tiki goddess—armless, legless, with a blunt chiseled head that's been gazing out over this sea for a trillion years. The tiki is riding that empty third board, which has morphed into a kahuna's mahogany longboard. Far in the rear, Loach is doggedly paddling in the tiki's wake.

For his part, Zep flashes that the Polynesian goddess is, yes, the very amulet that had once hung from Kaya's neck. Putting it another way, the amulet has been pulled into this more expansive version of reality, along with everything else. This perfect wave is drawing in the entire material substance of planet Earth.

Zep, Kaya, and Del look down, watching the world melt into their mighty simulation. Rivers and lakes, pastures and mountains, baseball stadiums, ocean liners and suspension bridges—all are stretching, turning liquid, and surrendering to the pull of the perfect wave, dribbling into the flow like fresh wet paintings on a spinning platter, feeding their colorful blotches into the omnivorous mound of blue.

Reveling in its plenitude, the wave lofts higher and higher—and Del shoots up toward the supernal crest.

"We're a planetary wave in probability space!" murmurs Kaya. "But what happens when it breaks?"

"Maybe it doesn't have to break," says Zep, working his double-loaded

board up the face of the watery slope. "It's the perfect wave, right? We can ride it forever."

"That tiki is so beautiful," says Kaya, turning her attention to the craggy face just behind them. "She looks green, now, doesn't she? Maybe she stands for Gaia. The planetary eigenvector."

The tiki hears her; she makes just the slightest of funky moves, tottering a few inches further forward on her oversized longboard. The beetle-browed goddess's motions are sheer understated elegance, drawn from the racial memories of Mother Earth.

"Dig it," says Kaya, sketching invisible energy lines with her fingers. "The tiki's still entangled with me—like by an astral cord around my neck. Everything's gonna work out for the best."

Surfing well above them, Del is happy, knowing he's at the top of the tournament ladder. Indeed, he's somewhere above the topmost rung of any conceivable ladder. The seas and mountains of planet Earth are folding into the perfect wave like rich loam opening up before a plowshare. The planet's mantle and its fragrant, sizzling core flow into the wave; vast whirlwinds suck the planet's atmosphere into the ever-mounting peak of ultramarine blue. So awesome. Only now it occurs to Del that—if this is as real as it seems—they're annihilating everyone on Earth.

A shadow falls over him. The highest edge of the wave has begun to curl over, occluding its face from the full glow of the atmosphere's light. In the nearly transparent sheet of water, shapes are moving, darting, dancing, chirping. They flip into the air, twist, and dive into the wave again, laughing. Dolphins by the thousands, millions, more.

One of them cuts in close to Del, chattering, and as Del speeds up his brain, the sounds congeal into human speech. It's still a simulated dolphin, yes, but it's also a storage module, holding one of the billions of human minds now folded into the flowing mountain, minds waiting for the planetary wave equation to settle into its new configuration so they can don their reborn forms.

"Your fuddy foe has tagged the tiki," says the dolphin with utterly grave hilarity.

Sure enough, Loach has caught hold of the third board's skeg—the fin that projects down into the water from the base of this board, a board so big that it might have been shaped from a single ancient mahogany tree. Climbing onto the tiki's longboard, Loach doesn't look the least bit intimidated.

His physical form is a churning mixture of Lova Moore and Lex Loach. Huge breasts emerge and wobble away, detached Dali blobs that surround him for a moment, try reattaching to his chest, find it unyielding and merge with the water instead. His lips puff up like botox worms, then shrivel away to show zombie skull fangs.

Loach crawls forward along the board, unable to find his balance. In order to drag himself to his feet, he wraps his arms around the goddess from behind, blinding her lidless eyes. The stonefaced tiki's expression shifts; her tightly pursed lips part in a warrior-woman's grimace. The tiki is enraged by Loach's sacrilege—but armless and legless as she is, she has no way of shaking him free. The great board wobbles.

The loss of poise spreads through the entire planetary wave. A period-doubling quiver of chaos percolates down through the quantum fluid. And now it seems the once-perfect wave is scraping across a subdimensional version of a reef, a crystalline ur-reality that was previously hidden beneath the cozy warmth of the natural world. The dark underlayment sends up the sinister tendrils of degenerate fixed-point computations, threatening to crystallize the entire wave-mountain into something dead and dull.

Del watches helplessly from above. The subdimensional reef is eating into the living water; it's killing the information flow.

Down in the crisis zone, Zep hears a horrible humming sound coming off the water, like brake drum linings peeling metal. It's a harsh scream that no board should make. Sparks are coming off the tail. The instability-fueled spikes of reef matter may snag him soon. And all around, the dolphins are screaming in fear. As he imagines the whole wonderful womany wave crystallizing into the dead fixed-point computations of the senile subdimensions, Zep feels deep grief. He should have loved Kaya while there was time. Marrying her wouldn't have been so bad. Their eyes lock.

"We can't let it set up like this," says Zep. "We can't let the boring crud win."

"I can help," says Kaya, solemn beneath her hand-drawn eyebrows. "Me and my tiki."

Standing erect on the rear of Zep's board, Kaya stretches her arms along the curve of an invisible circle whose far perimeter rings the tiki goddess. Kaya undulates her arms with a snaky wriggle and then—she's teleported herself to the longboard, replacing the tiki in the embrace of Lex Loach, with the tiki herself once again an amulet hanging from a bright red thread around Kaya's neck.

With a quick, efficient motion, Kaya elbows Loach in the solar plexus. His hold weakens and just then one of the boob-blobs, hovering like a satellite around its former owner, flattens and goes hard. It catches Loach in the face, rocking him back on his heels. Kaya reaches out and gives Loach a graceful one-finger shove. He slides off the board and hangs in mid-air like cartoon shock personified: a fixed expression of gaping eyes, open mouth, raised eyebrows. And then he begins to fall, not quite touching the face of the nearly vertical wave.

It's up to the three surfers to find a new home for the human race. With a supreme effort of will, Zep morphs his dinky Perfect Wave cave board into his good stick Chaos Attractor. The board's oddly adhesive surface seethes with sharp-cornered cubic waves. With a grim smile, Zep ups the simulation chaoticity yet again.

Feeling the fresh burst of energy, Kaya swings her massive longboard about, sending a square-humped wake toward Del, passing him that last extra bit of force that he needs. And now Del flies up the glassy cliff toward the very peak of the wave, streaking like a shooting star, sliding across the still-living liquid crest.

"Lead the wave, Del!" calls Zep.

Looking down from his vantage point, Del sees Zep and Kaya stuck at

the edges of a boring opaque stain that's turning to obsidian, to coal, to black ice. And below that is—something worse. Del hears the crystals forming far below, the dull sound of degenerate matter clanking into place. But he knows better than to dwell on that.

"Tubeleader Aspect!" he cries, his personal war-whoop.

There's still just room for him to ride, a thin, curling edge of dancing water. He crouches, feeling the outlines of the subdimensional reef viscerally through his feet, lowering his center of gravity to shift the moving mass of the wave.

The tipmost wave tube constricts and closes him in. But in a sense, he and his friends have designed this break. He knows what awaits them on the other side, for they've designed that too. Del's creating it even now, sculpting it into being as he carves the planetary wave toward a new solution.

"Surf into the light," he tells himself, and laughs. And then he's through the final tube.

Lex Loach wakes as he always does, with an abrupt twitch that startles him out of sleep with a gasp. It's always the same, the dream of an endless fall that ends the moment he hits the sand. His eyes gape and he chokes back a groan at once again finding himself curled up with a ratty old beach towel for a blanket, groggy under the boardwalk. Same old, same old—the scuffing footsteps of morning joggers overhead, the sand in his eyes and mouth and hair and all the creases of his skin. He drags himself out on hands and knees, squinting at the Inner Sun burning through the glary fog. Sandpipers patrol the wet strip just above the tide.

A cold shower in the public restrooms removes most of the sand. He blots himself with his sandy, sodden towel, then hits the hot air blower three times to dry his pubes, and a fourth time just because it is one of the day's few pleasures.

As he trudges back down the beach toward his job, he glares at Zep's mural—considers hawking phlegm on it, but he's been caught at this before by the Surf Shack's proprietor, with heavy consequences. The boss is a beast.

Lex rounds the corner of the restaurant, pushes open the back door, takes up the broom propped there and goes out again to sweep the parking lot. The trash bin reeks. Later he'll be cleaning it out. Something to look forward to. As he's brushing sullenly at spilled cornmeal and soda straw wrappers, he hears a commotion down on the beach, and pokes his head around the corner.

There's a platform under construction on a paved stretch near the playground, just above the sand. Giant speakers, a mike stand, and huge banners going up:

"SURF CITY WELCOMES TUBELEADER DELBERT!"

Frikkin' Delbert, Loach thinks. Frikkin' hometown homecoming for the hero, back from his epic journey across the interior of the earth, sweeping every tourney. Every night the TV in the Cheezemore Ratt Surf Shack is tuned to Delbert accepting some giant golden cup, or some enormous golden check for a million bucks, with golden babes hanging off his shoul-

ders. While Lex is slaving here, living off discarded crusts and soda dregs, sleeping in the sand.

"Hey, Lex, whatcha doin'?" Here she is, bugging him again.

"Hey, Jen," says Lex with a shrug. Jen makes him nervous. He can't figure out why she's nice to a loser like him. Obviously there's something wrong with her. "I got work to do," he says. "He'll be all over me if I stop."

"Oh . . . okay, well . . . you know Delbert's coming by in the afternoon? He's in town for Zep and Kaya's wedding anniversary? There's gonna be a party at their beach cottage on the North End, and I was thinking, maybe, if you wanted to, you know, come with me, I could get you in?"

Lex stops moving, grabs onto the broom handle as if it's a lifeline, a crutch, putting his whole weight into it. What the fuck is going on with him? Are those tears? His belly is spasming. He's a crybaby now, on top of everything else?

"Sorry, Lex, if you don't want to. . . ."

"I don't know, Jen, all right? Let me think about it, okay? Jeez!"

She steps back and if she says anything else, it's drowned out by the sound of the screen door slamming. The boss is coming after him. As usual.

"You done sweeping, Loach? Then get out the bleach and go after the dumpster."

The voice is so harsh it cuts through Lex's general despair and makes his baseline resentments seem like dreams of paradise. But what can he say? The old bastard has legally indentured Lex via some unsavory deal that Loach Senior could never bring himself to speak of—and then Loach Senior died. Lex has no choice but to live with the unbreakable contract. Under the boardwalk.

"Almost, yeah," he mumbles.

"What's that?" says the Surf Shack's owner, coming in closer, leaning over him, the smell of melted cheese on his breath making Lex wilt away as if from one of the pizza ovens.

"Almost done, sir," says Lex a bit louder.

"Squeak up, boy!"

Lex draws himself upright, to his full six foot two, from which height he still has to look up another foot or so to meet the black beady eyes of his employer.

"I said yes, sir, Mr. Ratt, sir, I'm almost done with the work," barks Lex.

"That's the right attitude," says the shopkeeper, adjusting his tall silk hat. "That's how it's gotta be. Maybe someday, when you've paid off your debt, say five or ten years from now, I'll let you call me Cheezemore. Like my friends do. Till then you're mine, boy. I own you."

The screen door slaps shut. Lex waits a moment, till Ratt is gone for sure, then sags against the broomstick he clutches. Jen comes to him again, gently rubbing his aching back.

Lex looks out at the waves, wishing they could carry him away, but it's hopeless. The ocean curves and up into mist, offering no chance of escape. As far as he might sail, the great seas of the Hollow Earth would wrap around and bring him right back here.

It's Del, Zep, and Kaya's world—at least for now. But perhaps there's hope.

Maybe someday the perfect wave will break. ○

According to *Locus*, Mike Resnick is the all-time leading award winner for short fiction, and most of those stories have appeared in *Asimov's*. His latest novel, *Starship: Mercenary*, appeared from Pyr in December, and Subterranean Press will be publishing *The Other Teddy Roosevelts* in February. In his latest tale, he takes a look at the precious gifts that can be found, and lost, at . . .

ALASTAIR BAFFLE'S EMPORIUM OF WONDERS

Mike Resnick

Gold and Silver—that's us. We've been a team since major league baseball ended at the Mississippi River and the flag only had forty-eight stars. (Looked a lot nicer back then. More regular, sort of, with six rows of eight—or maybe it was eight rows of six. I suppose it depends on whether you were standing or lying down.) Between us we've outlived three wives (one of them his, two of them mine) and two kids (both his), we've stayed friends for more than three-quarters of a century (seventy-eight years to be exact), and we've been living together at the Hector McPherson Retirement Home since . . . well, since we couldn't live on our own anymore.

He's Gold—Maury Gold. Me, I'm Nate Silver. I think it was Silverstein until my grandfather changed it back when Teddy Roosevelt was still president. Maury's dad changed his right after World War I, from Goldberg or Goldman or Gold-something-else. Makes no difference what they used to be. We're Gold and Silver now.

We met seventy-eight years ago, like I said. We've always lived in Chicago. It was pretty safe when we were kids. The cops had cleaned up Al Capone and his friends, and the place wasn't crawling with junkies and panhandlers yet, so we were each allowed to take the subway down to the Loop by ourselves, me from Rogers Park on the North Side, Maury from South Shore a couple of miles beyond the University of Chicago,

which was overflowing with geniuses and Communists—frequently the same people—back in those days.

One of the things I loved to do was go to the Palmer House, the ritziest hotel in town. The guest rooms started on the third or fourth floor, but the ground floor and the mezzanine were filled with shops that carried the most fascinating things: clocks that glowed in the dark, pianos that played by themselves, clothes and jewels imported from exotic-sounding places like Constantinople and Hong Kong and Bombay.

And the most fascinating thing of all was a tiny store up on the mezzanine. It was called Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders, and it was a magic shop. It carried every trick under the sun (or so it seemed to me). There were boxes where Alastair Baffle would put anything from a coin to an egg, and it would vanish right before your eyes. There were empty hats that suddenly weren't empty any more, but filled with rabbits or flowers or colored silks. There was a full-sized guillotine, and somehow, faster than the eye could follow, the blade would drop and magically miss Alastair Baffle's neck. There were card tricks and rope tricks and magic wands that could fly through the air. There was a clock with the face of a beautiful woman, and just when you lost interest in it she'd smile and speak to you.

And the most wonderful thing of all was the magic show. Oh, he wouldn't perform it for free—but if you promised to buy a trick, and showed him your money (usually fifty cents would do, but if you didn't have it, once in a while he'd agree to sell you a twenty-five-cent trick), he'd spend half an hour showing you all the new tricks that had arrived since your last visit.

I thought only magicians would frequent the store, but the clientele didn't look like the kind of magicians you saw on stage. (No, I'd never seen a magic show on stage when I was a kid, but I saw all the ads for them, and I knew that magicians were long lean guys who looked good in white tie and tails like Fred Astaire, and were always assisted by scantily clad women who made me eager to grow up.)

But the few people who I saw coming and going weren't like that at all. One of them looked just like Paul Muni in one of those movies where he's on the lam from the law. Another was all decked out in silks and satins, and wore a turban with a glittering jewel on the front of it. There were women, too; not the kind you expected to see on stage, but with elegant hats and veils, exotic make-up, and dark gloves. Those were the days when a lot of women wore wraps that were made from foxes that still had the heads attached. One day I saw Alastair Baffle wave good-bye to a woman who was leaving the store as I was entering. Then he said something, not in English, to one of the fox heads, and I could have sworn it looked up and winked at him.

My allowance back then was a quarter a week. I used to go there whenever I had fifty cents to buy a trick—but since the subway cost a quarter each way, that was about once a month. I kept wondering why no other kid had discovered the almost-free magic show—and then I met Maury.

He'd been going to the store for more than a year, same as me but on different Saturdays, gazing at all the wonders and getting his magic show in exchange for buying a trick.

"Ah! Young Mister Silver!" said Alastair Baffle when I entered his Emporium that Saturday morning. "There is someone here I think you should meet."

I was hoping it was a half-dressed magician's assistant, but it was only another boy, dark-haired, kind of skinny, a couple of inches shorter than me.

"Mister Silver, say hello to Mister Gold."

"Maury Gold," he said, extending his hand. I took it, told him I was Nate Silver, and we promptly lost all interest in each other when Alastair Baffle began performing the Corinthian Rope Trick, followed by the Vanishing Mouse. But I had an extra dime and we stopped for a soda when we left, and we got to talking, and found that we had all kinds of things in common despite his being a White Sox fan and me rooting for the Cubs. We spent hours there, and finally decided we'd better go home before our parents called the cops, but we made arrangements to meet at the Emporium of Wonders four weeks later.

We met every month for two years. Then his dad got transferred to the north side, they moved, and he wound up in my school district. We became inseparable. We played on the same teams, read the same books, lusted after the same girls, and while we didn't go to Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders once a month any more, we remembered to go once each year to celebrate our meeting.

World War II broke out just about the time we graduated from high school. We both enlisted the same day, but I wound up in Europe and Maury spent the next three and a half years in the Pacific. He was at Tarawa and Okinawa, I was in Italy and the Battle of the Bulge, neither of us ever caught a bullet or a social disease, and when we got out we decided to go into business together.

Truth is, we went into a lot of businesses together, one after the other. Never went broke, never got ahead. We'd try one for a couple of years, then decide it wasn't going to make us rich, sell out or close up, start another, and so on. We owned a drugstore, a pizzeria, a delivery service, a hardware store, even a record shop. The record shop was the only one that ever made a decent profit, but by then rock and roll had replaced real music and we couldn't stand the sound of it, so we sold out once again.

And then one day we turned around, and we were a pair of eighty-two-year-old widowers. I'd lost my first wife to cancer, my second to a stroke. Maury's wife was killed in a car accident, he lost a son in Vietnam and a daughter to drugs. We were living on our Social Security checks, which weren't much. Maury's arthritis was getting worse every month; there were days he couldn't drag himself out of bed, days he found it too painful to walk. With me it was a bunch of things—I'd lost a lung to cancer, I had prostate problems, an artificial hip, a few other ailments, none of them fatal, but they'd started to add up—and with no one around to care for either of us we decided it was time to move into an assisted-living facility. We chose the Hector McPherson Home, not because the service was any better, and certainly not for the food, but because they had a small apartment with two bedrooms, and we could keep each other company. Besides, no one else wanted to listen to us. Most people would talk about

Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan and Julia Roberts and Tom Cruise. Us, we'd talk about Citation and the Bambino, Mae West and Bogart and Lefty Grove. They'd pin pictures of Pam Anderson and Paris Hilton on their walls; we'd remember pin-ups of Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth in our barracks.

We moved in a couple of years before the millennium, and we were reasonably content. I suppose some of the others thought we were gay, though straight or gay I don't know what they thought a couple of ninety-year-old geezers could do when the lights were out. We didn't figure to see much of the future, so we talked about the past. We'd talk about JFK and Nixon, and about Nashua and Swaps. We'd talk about Sugar Ray Robinson and Jersey Joe Walcott, about the ones who lived and the ones—there were so many of them, like Marilyn and James Dean and Brian Piccolo—who didn't.

And sooner or later the conversation would come around to Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders, where we'd met so many years ago.

"What a place it was!" said Maury. "You know, I really believed that he could perform magic."

"Ah, come on, Maury," I said. "He sold tricks. Every one of them had a gimmick. You always bought one, and he always showed you how it worked."

"I didn't say you or I could do magic," replied Maury. "I said I thought he could."

"You're turning into a senile old man," I told him.

"And you're turning into a grouchy old one," he shot back. "Hell, I was a kid. My whole life, the whole world was ahead of me, a billion possibilities. Why *shouldn't* I believe in magic?"

"He never called himself a magician," I said. "I think the term is illusionist."

"He never called himself anything," said Maury stubbornly. "But he could make a parrot vanish, or turn it back into an egg, and when I was eleven years old that was magic enough for me."

"He *was* good, wasn't he?" I said. "I wonder why we never saw him on TV or in the movies."

"If your film lab can make Superman fly or send the *Millennium Falcon* out at light speeds, what do you need a real magician for?"

"He wasn't a real magician," I said.

"He was real enough for you and me," said Maury. "We kept going back, didn't we?"

"Until we outgrew him."

"I never outgrew him," insisted Maury. "Life just kept getting more and more complicated, and I had other things to do."

"Hell," I said, "maybe we should have hired him to entertain at the pizza joint. We might not have gone broke quite so fast."

"He wouldn't have done it."

"How do you know?"

"He was a connoisseur, not a performer," said Maury with conviction.

"Too bad," I said. "Maybe he could have magicked the customers into spending more money."

"He probably could have, if he'd wanted to," said Maury. "I don't think he gave much of a damn about money. Why would he take half an hour out of his Saturday and show us a couple of dozen tricks, just to get us to spend a quarter or a half dollar?"

Maury was like that. He'd get going on a subject, something he remembered from thirty or fifty or seventy years ago, and he'd just go on and on and on.

"Give it a rest," I said irritably. "He's probably been dead for half a century."

"So what? He's the reason we met."

"Yeah, Wall Street would have tanked if it weren't for Gold and Silver."

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "You didn't used to be like this."

"I didn't used to need my own private oxygen supply," I said. "I didn't used to have to go the bathroom every hour. I didn't used to need a cane. I didn't used to do a lot of things I do now."

"Grump," he muttered. "You're an old grump."

"And are you a young one?" I said. "I seem to remember ninety candles on your birthday cake. Damned near set the place on fire."

"Come on, Nate," he said. "These are supposed to be our golden years. Try not to be so damned grouchy."

"My golden years were a quarter of a century ago—and everything hurt *then* too."

"You think you're the only one who ever got old?" he demanded. "I'm not even going to be able to walk from my wheelchair to my goddamned bed in another month—but I'm not sitting around just waiting to die!"

So I got his daily harangue about how we shouldn't be spectators at the pageant of life, that we should be participants, and like always I tried not to laugh at the thought of him and his wheelchair and me with my metal hip and my oxygen bottle participating in anything. I mean, hell, half the time his hands were too sore even to move a checker across the board, and there were days, more and more often, when I considered just throwing my oxygen out the window and ending it all.

He calmed down after awhile, like he always did, and we started talking about who you'd rather have watching your back in Tombstone, John Wayne or Gary Cooper. Probably Clint Eastwood could have handled them both, but he was one of the new kids, so we never even considered him.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper before," said Maury. He was always saying that, and he always meant it. It wasn't his fault he was so riddled with arthritis that he had to blow up every now and then.

"No problem," I said.

"Thanks."

"Of course," I continued, "if I'd have known what a pain in the ass you'd be to live with, I'd have had Alastair Baffle turn you into a horned toad all those years ago."

"At least I could have gone on the road with him. Sylvia's notion of a vacation was a shopping trip to Evanston."

"He didn't go on the road," I said. "He was always there."

"I wonder if he still is."

"Come on, Maury, he wasn't a young man back when we were going there. He'd be, I don't know, maybe 125 or 130 now."

"I know, I know," he said. "Still, I wonder if the shop is still there."

"After seventy-five years?" I said.

"We stopped by to tell him we were going into the service, don't you remember?" said Maury.

"Okay, so it was open seventy-two years ago. Big difference."

"Nate, I'm going to spend the rest of my life in this fucking building. I'd like to go out one last time."

"So go."

"And the one thing I'd most like to see is Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders."

"I'd like to see Babe Ruth call his shot against the Cubs," I said. "We're both of us doomed to be disappointed."

"Babe Ruth's dead and buried. Maybe the shop is still open. Maybe his kid or his grandkid is running it. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm a ninety-two-year-old man with one lung and one hip," I replied. "Just getting up in the morning is adventure enough."

"Well, I'm going to go," he said. "If I wait another week I won't be able to move out of this fucking chair, so I'm going tomorrow morning."

"To find a shop that probably hasn't been in business for sixty years or more," I said. "You're losing it, Maury."

"If I am, maybe Alastair Baffle's is where I'll find it."

The nurses came by to check on us then, and after they left we watched a wrestling match on TV. Wrestling has changed a lot since the days of Verne Gagne and Strangler Lewis. Nobody used wrestling holds anymore. They fought with chairs and tables, and a third party was always racing into the ring to coldcock whoever he was up against on next week's card. After awhile I got sick of it, as I always do, and went to bed.

When I got up I figured Maury had forgotten all about his idiot plan to go downtown and hunt for the magic shop, but he'd already shaved and gotten dressed. When he saw I was awake, he wheeled his chair over to my bed.

"Jake, do you mind if I take along a couple of your Percosets, just in case?"

"No, of course you can take them," I said, swinging my feet tenderly to the floor. "Hell, we might as well take the whole bottle."

"We?" he repeated.

"You don't think I'd let you go alone, do you?"

"I was afraid you might," he admitted.

"What kind of friend would I be if I did that?"

"The grouchy kind."

"I'm just grouchy because I don't know what's out there anymore," I said. "Maybe it's time for each of us to take a last look."

"Thanks, Nate."

"By the way, are we *allowed* to leave the place?"

"I never thought of that," he admitted.

"Maybe we should sneak out now, while they're all busy preparing morning meds and breakfast."

He nodded, popped a Percoset and a couple of his own pain pills, and got up out of his wheelchair.

"Here," I said, handing him my cane and going to my closet for my spare. "Let's go down the back stairs and out into the alley. They'll all be working at the front of the place."

And that's what we did.

"Where the hell's the subway from here?" asked Maury when we'd made it to a corner.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I think we're far enough out that we'll want the El."

"I don't see any elevated stations or tracks," he said, looking around.

"I don't see anything that looks like a subway station either," I said.

"So what'll we do?" asked Maury. "I'm not going back, not after I've only traveled half a block."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my battered old leather wallet. "How many more trips out are we going to take?" I said. "What the hell am I saving it for?"

He grinned and flagged down a passing cab. It took us a couple of minutes to get into it—we're neither of us as spry as we used to be—but we finally got seated and told the cabbie, who looked like he'd been born anywhere but here, to take us to the Palmer House.

"You're sure you don't want to stop for some breakfast first?" I asked Maury as we drove through the Near North Side.

"The Palmer House is still in business," said Maury, "or the cabbie would have asked us where it was, or what we were talking about. And if Chicago's most elegant hotel is still in business, it's got to have a restaurant or two on the premises."

"Yeah, it makes sense," I agreed.

"And that way the trip won't be a total waste if the shop is gone."

"Ah, come on, Maury. I'm happy to see the city one last time, but you don't *really* think the shop is still there, do you?"

"Even if it's not, this is where Gold and Silver met and became a life-long team," he said. "What's wrong with seeing the beginning one more time before we reach the end?"

"Hell, if you'd put it that way last night we'd never have had an argument."

"Come on, Nate," he said. "We always argue." Suddenly he smiled. "That's probably what's kept us together so long. Neither of us will ever admit the other got the best of him."

I didn't answer, but I had a feeling he was right.

Traffic started getting really heavy, downtown heavy, Loop heavy, and we crawled along, getting maybe a block a minute if the lights were with us, less if they weren't. But finally we pulled up to the door of the Palmer House. My eyes aren't sharp enough to read a meter any longer, so I just kept shoving bills at the cabbie, and when he smiled too much I took the last one back and we hobbled into the hotel.

"Hasn't changed much," I noted.

"Look at all the gilt," said Maury. "It shines just the way it did seventy-five years ago."

"You know," I said, "I swear I remember that big leather chair."

"Me too," he said. "I'm starting to get excited. Maybe it is still here."

"There's only one way to find out," I said, indicating the escalator.

We waited until no one else wanted to use it—we're not too quick or steady on our feet even on good days—and then rode up to the mezzanine level.

"Off to the right," said Maury.

"I know."

We walked past a row of stores, mostly selling jewelry and women's clothing, and then we came to the shop—but it wasn't Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders anymore. There were twenty pairs of women's shoes displayed in the window, and hundreds more inside.

"May I help you?" said a well-dressed young saleswoman as we stood in the doorway, seeing not what was there now but what used to be there.

"No, thank you," I said.

"If you're looking for the formal wear shop, it's down in the gallery."

"Formal wear?" said Maury.

"They used to be here until about six years ago."

"You'd be surprised at what used to be here," he replied sadly. Then he turned to me. "Let's go."

"How are you holding up?" I asked as we approached the escalator.

"I'm okay," he said. Then: "So I'm a foolish old man. At least I know for sure now that it's gone."

"Too bad," I said. "I could have used a little half-hour magic show."

We rode down to the main floor, and then the pain got too much for Maury and he had to sit down. Naturally he chose the big leather chair, which meant I was probably going to need help pulling him up out of it.

He popped a couple of pain pills, then grimaced, and asked for a hand up. I was already wheezing and sucking oxygen, so I asked an old white-haired guard to help.

"Thanks," said Maury when we'd pulled him to his feet.

"Happy to be of service," said the guard. "Can I direct you anywhere?"

"I sure as hell doubt it," I said. "We came down here looking for a shop that probably hasn't been in business for the last fifty or sixty years."

"It was a silly notion," said Maury. "It was my fault."

"What were you looking for?"

"Makes no difference," said Maury. "It's not here."

"Stores move. Maybe I can help you."

"This one was before even your time," I said.

"It must have been some shop to bring you two back after all these years," said the guard.

"It was," said Maury. "It was a little magic store where we met for the first time."

"Owned by a fellow with a really odd name?" asked the guard.

"Alastair Baffle," said Maury.

"That's the one."

"You've heard of it?" said Maury eagerly. "Is there a photo of it around here somewhere?"

"Why settle for a photo when you can visit the real thing?" asked the guard.

"It's still in business?" I said disbelievingly.

"Yeah. It's moved around a lot. Last I heard it was just south of the Loop on State Street, right near where I used to go to watch the burlesque shows when I was a callow young man." He smiled and winked at us. "Now I'm a dirty old one."

"And you're sure it's Alastair Baffle's?" asked Maury.

"You don't forget a name like that."

"Thanks!" said Maury, shaking the guard's hand. "You don't know how much this means to me."

"Have fun," said the guard. "Every now and then I go looking for my boyhood too, though it's more likely to be found at a shuttered comic book store, or maybe over at Soldier Field."

I knew what he meant. The Bears were still playing at Wrigley Field back then, but half the fathers in Chicago taught their kids to drive in the Soldier Field parking lot on weekends.

We trudged out the door and walked over to State Street. Then Maury had to stop and grab a lamppost for support.

"Nate," he said, "I hate to ask, but do you have enough cash for another cab ride? We've got to be five or six blocks away, and I don't think I can make it that far."

"Yeah, I've got it. How bad are the legs?"

"Pretty bad," he admitted, leaning against the lamppost.

I flagged down a Yellow cab—I don't think they have Checkers anymore—and had it take us slowly down the street. Maury kept his nose practically pressed against the right-hand window.

"Damn it, Nate!" he muttered as we passed the block where the Follies and the Rialto burlesque theatres used to be. "It's not here! The old bastard lied to us!"

"Cabbie, stop here!" I said. (Well, actually I yelled it.)

We screeched to a stop, and Maury groaned as he practically got thrown into the front seat. "What the hell's going on?" he muttered.

"You were looking out the wrong window," I said—for there, on the other side of the street, was Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders, right next door to the shuttered Madame Fifi's Palace of Delights.

"I'll be damned!" said Maury, getting painfully out of the cab while I paid the driver. "Even I didn't really believe it would be here."

The cab pulled away, glad to be rid of two crazy old guys, and we hobbled across the street, both of us leaning heavily on our canes. The window wasn't much—a couple of kids' tricks, and posters of Houdini, Dunninger, and Blackstone—but that made sense. You didn't want to put anything too valuable in your window, not south of the Loop. It had been gentrified a few blocks farther on, but this was still a No Man's Land, not quite the Loop, not quite the elegant condos that had replaced most of the slums between there and Chinatown on Cermak Road.

I turned to Maury, whose eyes were as wide and bright as a kid who'd just discovered a candy store.

"You gonna stand out here all day?" I said. "What are we waiting for?"

He smiled, opened the door, and stepped into the Emporium of Wonders, with me right beside him.

The guy behind the counter had his back turned to us. "Look around, gentlemen," he said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

The place was smaller than the shop at the Palmer House, but it carried the same magical paraphernalia, the same production boxes, the same selection of wands. I felt like I was eleven years old again, and I could see Maury's arthritis almost visibly retreating from him.

Then the guy turned around, and I did a double-take. He was the spitting image of Alastair Baffle, even down to the little wart at the tip of his nose. He had to be a grandson, or maybe a great-grandson, but he was clearly related to the original.

"Ah!" he said. "Master Gold and Master Silver. Welcome back! Forgive me for saying it, but Time has not been as kind to you as you might have wished."

"You know us?" asked Maury.

"Certainly. You are Morris Gold, and *you*"—he turned to me—"are Nathan Silver. It is good to see you again. You grew up well, I take it?"

"We became partners," said Maury.

"Gold and Silver. Of course."

"How old are you?" I asked, frowning.

"As old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth." It didn't get a reaction, so he continued: "Edmund Gwenn said that in *Miracle on 34th Street*. A sweet man. He used to stop by the old shop in the Palmer House whenever he was performing on the Chicago stage."

"How can you still be around, and looking exactly the way you looked seventy-five years ago?"

"I suppose I should say diet and clean living, but in point of fact I love to eat, I smoke Turkish cigarettes in enormous quantities, and I loathe exercise."

"You haven't got a magic trick for becoming young again, have you?" asked Maury with a smile.

"You couldn't afford it," said Baffle.

"Okay," I said. "Who are you really?"

"I've already told you."

"I know what you told me and it's bullshit," I said. "No one's that old."

He stared at me, not angrily, not annoyed, but coldly, like he was studying a bug. I figured I'd just stare him down, but somehow I couldn't meet his gaze.

"Come on, Nate," said Maury. "He's the same guy. I remember him like it was yesterday."

"Yeah?" I said. "Well, he's not supposed to *look* like it was yesterday."

"I see you have a wallet in your pocket, Master Silver," said Baffle. He seemed amused—not like anything funny was happening, but just because he was making me so uncomfortable. "The last time we met you had something else in your pocket. Do you remember what it was?"

"Sure," I lied. "What do *you* think it was?"

"A very racy paperback," he said.

It sounded right.

"And the very first time?" he continued.

"How the hell should I know?" I said irritably, because I knew he was

going to tell me, and that meant I was wrong and he really *was* Alastair Baffle.

"A Milky Way candy bar," said Baffle. "It was a very warm day, and I told you that you must choose between eating the candy bar and handling a magic trick, but that you couldn't do both because the chocolate was very soft and would stick to your fingers and then rub off on the trick."

I just stared at him for a minute. "Damn," I said at last. "I *do* remember that."

"And you're still here," said Maury enthusiastically.

"The store is my life," he replied. "Several of them, in fact." He looked at Maury, whose face was suddenly tense. "I think you had better sit down on purpose, Master Gold, before you sit down by accident." He produced a chair from somewhere and brought it over to Maury.

"Thank you, Mr. Baffle," said Maury, almost collapsing into it.

"Call me Alastair. We need no formality between old friends. And old friends we are. How long has it been since you two first met in the Emporium?"

I was still trying to figure out where the flaw was, how he could present himself as maybe 140 years old and how I couldn't disprove it, but Maury spoke right up.

"Seventy-eight years," he said.

"How time flies!" said Baffle. "I would have sworn it was no more than seventy-four or seventy-five years."

I couldn't tell if he was trying to be funny, or if he meant it. While I was trying to figure it out, he spoke again.

"Well, what can I show you two today?"

"I don't know," I said. "Truth to tell, we really didn't expect to find you still in business." *Or alive.* "What have you got?"

"Everything," he said.

I spotted a production box with mirrors on the side, the kind that makes it seem like something is vanishing right before your eyes, rather than the more traditional box where the object simply disappears once it's briefly hidden from view. "How about this?" I said, pointing to the box.

He shook his head. "We can do better than that, Master Silver," he said. "When you were a child, you could be amused by a child's tricks. But you are an adult now, and you crave more than a momentary amusement, do you not?"

"What I crave and what I'm likely to be around for are two different things," I said wryly. "Maury, this was your idea. What trick do *you* want to see?"

"I'll leave it up to Mr . . . to Alastair," said Maury, his fingers starting to twist the way they did whenever the arthritis got really bad.

"Tricks are for children," said Baffle, "and you have outgrown them." He paused. "I think today I shall show you some of my wonders for adults." He turned to study the shelves behind him. The top shelf was shrouded in darkness, though the rest of the room was well-lit. On the next shelf was a trio of shrunken heads; one of them stuck its tongue out at me, and another giggled.. There was a miniature ping-pong table, not a foot long,

with tiny paddles and a ball the size of a bee-bee; as I looked at it, the two paddles started a vigorous volley. There was a candy cane that changed into a snake, then an arrow, and then back to a candy cane. "Cecil B. De-Mille should have visited my store before filming *The Ten Commandments*," remarked Baffle, holding up the candy cane. "This is much more colorful than the simplistic prop Charlton Heston used." It morphed into a belt, then back into a candy cane again, and he laid it on a shelf.

"What else can it do?" asked Maury, as wide-eyed and eager as he'd been seventy-eight years ago.

"Party tricks," said Baffle contemptuously. "Nothing for adults." He walked to the far end of the counter, picked up a small jar, and brought it back, setting it down on the counter next to Maury.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Unless I miss my guess, and I rarely do, it is something you were discussing just yesterday," answered Baffle.

"Jesus!" exclaimed Maury. "Take a look, Nate!"

I walked over and peered into the bottle.

"It's *him*, Nate!" said Maury excitedly. "And he's calling his shot, just like in the '32 World Series!"

And there was the Babe, maybe half an inch high, pointing out to all the fans exactly where he was sending the next pitch. It wasn't static, either. The shortstop was thumping his glove, the umpire was signaling Ruth to stop pointing and take his stance.

I looked up at Baffle. "How did you do that?" I asked.

He looked amused, and I felt like an insect again. "With mirrors."

"What the hell kind of answer is that?" I demanded.

"The kind you paid for, and worth every penny of it."

I pulled a five out and laid it on the counter.

"Okay," I said. "Now how did you do it?"

"I'm sorry, Master Silver," he replied, "but I never offer two answers to only one question." He pushed the bill back to me.

"What else have you got?" asked Maury.

"Any number of things," answered Baffle. "Now, where is my Morris Gold collection. Ah!" He reached up to a higher shelf, grabbed some sheet music, and held it up for us to see. "The song you never composed." Then a book. "The novel you never wrote." A look of infinite sadness crossed his face as he displayed the photograph of a small boy. "The grandson you never had."

"He looks a lot like Mark," said Maury. Mark was the son he lost in Vietnam. "Who is it?"

"I just told you."

"But I never had a grandson."

"I know," said Baffle. "So of course the photo never existed." He blew on it, and it vanished right in front of us.

"I thought you weren't going to show us any tricks today," I said..

"And I haven't," he answered. "Tricks are for children."

"Then what do you call what you're showing us?"

He pointed to a trio of murky glass jars. "Hopes. Dreams. Regrets."

"Seriously, how did you pull that off?" I persisted.

"Seriously?" he repeated, arching an eyebrow and seeming to look right through me to some interior spot that nobody was ever supposed to see. "You take two well-meaning but unexceptional lives, stir in all the might-have-beens and never-weres, baste lightly with the optimism of youth, the cynicism of maturity, and the pessimism of age, add a soupçon of triumph and a cup of failure, heat the oven with vanished passion, sprinkle with just the tiniest pinch of wisdom, and there you have it." He smiled, as if totally pleased with his explanation. "Works every time."

It sounded like a salesman's line of bullshit, but I could tell that Maury had bought every word of it. His eyes shone, his face glowed, and he was eleven years old again, hanging on Alastair Baffle's every word.

"I hate to rush you," said Baffle, "but it's almost time to feed the banshee and the gorgon."

"Can we see them?" asked Maury.

"Perhaps," said Baffle. "But I rather suspect they will look exactly like cats to you."

"And to everyone else?" I suggested.

"It depends on whether they can see past the surface of things."

"Were you always this quick with a slick answer?" I said, annoyed that even after all these years it all still mystified me. My brain kept saying *illusions* and something else kept whispering *magic*.

"No, Master Silver," he replied. "But then, you were not always this quick with a sarcastic question."

"In some circles sarcasm is considered a sign of intellect," I said defensively.

"Those aren't circles, Master Silver," responded Baffle. "You just can't see all the angles from inside them."

Maury groaned just then. I turned and saw that his body was all twisted up the way he gets when he's in pain. I pulled a couple of pills out of his pocket and popped them into his mouth.

I waited a minute, then said, "Did that help?"

He grimaced. "Not much. It's bad this time, Nate."

"I'll take you home," I said.

"Yeah, I think you'd better."

Suddenly Alastair Baffle was standing between us and the door. "I just want to say what a pleasure it has been to see my two old friends once more," he said. "And I hope to see you again in the future."

"Don't count on it," I said grimly. "I think this was our last foray into the world, such as it is."

"Then at least let me shake your hand good-bye," he said, grabbing my hand. He turned to Maury. "And yours, Master Gold."

Maury looked scared to death—he hated to be touched when he was in this much pain—and I took a step forward to stop Baffle from taking his hand. But he gently pushed me aside—I say "gently" because he didn't seem to use any force, but I had a feeling he could have pushed an elephant aside with as little effort—and he flashed Maury a smile.

"Have no fear, Master Gold. I'll be very careful."

He reached out and put Maury's twisted, bony, crumpled hand in his own. I've seen the nurses do that on occasion: Maury always screams, and

half the time he passes out. But this time he didn't yell, didn't faint, didn't even groan. He just looked at Baffle with the strangest expression on his face, as if he was watching his first magic show again, and the world was young and filled with infinite promise.

I escorted him out to the street and flagged down another cab. When I turned around to start helping him into the back seat, I found him standing erect, not using his cane at all. He was holding his hand up and flexing his fingers over and over, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

I had a lot of questions to ask Alastair Baffle, but I suddenly heard the lock click in the door, and when I turned to face it he'd already hung up his "Gone to Lunch" sign.

I couldn't believe the change in Maury. That night he skipped two of his strongest pain medications, and the next afternoon he actually shuffled a deck of cards. He hadn't been able to do that in years. The doctors claimed that it was a semi-miracle, that sometimes arthritis went into remission—but never this fast or this completely. Maury listened politely to them, but when we were alone together he told me that there was no question in *his* mind that it was all due to Alastair Baffle.

He cashed a couple of bonds—I don't know what he was saving them for anyway—and the next week we went down to the Emporium of Wonders again.

"Welcome back, my once-young friends," said Baffle as we entered the shop. "What shall I show you gentlemen this time?"

"Anything you want," answered Maury.

"Let me think," said Baffle. "Ah! I have just the thing!" He went into his back room and emerged a moment later with a small white lab rat in a cage that could have held a sixty-pound dog.

"The Neptunian Spin-Devil," he announced. "One of the rarest creatures in the Solar System, if not the galaxy."

"Sure it is," I said in bored tones.

"You doubt it?" he asked in that tone that made me feel like he was a cat playing with its food, and that I was its meal.

"Of course I doubt it."

"Oh, ye of little faith. What troubles you about it?"

"Other than its appearance, you mean?" I said. "Does it breathe?"

"Certainly," replied Baffle. "Why should you ask, Master Silver?"

"Because Neptune is a gas giant with no oxygen."

Baffle looked genuinely surprised. "Really?"

"Really," I said.

He shrugged. "Well, they *told* me it was Neptune, but I suppose it could just as easily have been Pollux IV."

"Come on," I said. "It's a white mouse, and it's from the pet shop down the street."

"If you say so, Master Silver," said Baffle. Suddenly he leaned over the cage and said "Boo!"

The mouse became a tawny fifty-pound *something* in the blink of an eye, growling, spinning in circles, flapping two sets of vestigial wings.

"What the hell *is* it?" I demanded.

"I already told you," answered Baffle with a smug smile. "You live in a changing universe, Master Silver. You must never assume that all things change at the same pace."

He held the Spin-Devil up for Maury to see, then carried its cage to the back room.

"This guy is half nuts and wholly dangerous," I whispered to Maury. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"You do what you want," he replied. "He's a miracle worker, and I need another miracle. I'm staying."

I could see it was pointless to argue with him, so I just sat and stared at a tribal death mask that was hanging on the wall, and tried to ignore the feeling that it was grinning at me.

"You're looking better today, Master Gold," said Baffle when he'd rejoined us. "I am delighted to see that your condition was not permanent."

"It was until I met you," said Maury.

"I'm flattered that you should think so," said Baffle, "but I'm just a shopkeeper. And now that I've displayed today's wonder, what trick can I sell you?"

"I can't see out of my right eye," said Maury. "Glaucoma, macular degeneration, I don't know. Bunch of long words that don't mean anything. Do for my vision what you did for my arthritis."

Baffle smiled. "You want a god," he said. "I am merely a shopkeeper."

"I want a miracle. You're in the miracle business."

"I am in the magic business."

"Same thing," insisted Maury.

"Ask for some other trick," I said, getting annoyed with Maury's worshipping attitude. "I'll bet he could make a blind man lame."

"Your cynicism does not become you, Master Silver." Baffle reached into his pocket, pulled out a tiny jar that seemed to be filled with dust, and handed it to Maury. "Put a minuscule pinch of this in a glass of water tonight and rinse your eye out. It may ease the pain."

"I'm not *in* pain," replied Maury. "I'm blind."

"I am not a doctor," said Baffle apologetically. "This is the only eye illusion I know."

Maury took the powder home, rinsed his eye out with it—and the next morning he could see.

Maury cashed all his investments—there weren't that many—and started going back to the Emporium every few days, sometimes with me, sometimes alone when I just couldn't face another day of his idolizing Baffle. He started taking long vigorous walks at night, and doing push-ups and sit-ups in the morning. It used to be when we'd try to assemble our all-time greatest Bears team he'd forget that Gale Sayers and Walter Payton played the same position, or he'd think Sid Luckman had been Lucky Sid Somebody-or-other—but now he was sharp as a tack. How many states did Harry Truman win in 1948? Michael Jordan's scoring average during the first championship season? Rosemary Clooney's first gold record? He knew them all.

Alastair Baffle never offered to sell me a trick, and I never offered to

buy one. Maury kept urging me to, but I figured I'd spent more than ninety years picking up all these aches and pains, and I'd *earned* them. But it was difficult, seeing Maury grow stronger and healthier each day. I was always the bigger and stronger one, and now for the first time in my life I wasn't able to keep up with him. I mean, hell, even his hair got thicker. The first time someone asked if he was my son it was everything I could do not to club both of them with my cane.

And then one day he was gone. I knew he'd left to visit Baffle—it was the only place he ever went—but that night he didn't come home. He didn't call, and the next morning the home reported him missing to the police. Didn't do a bit of good. No one could turn up any trace of him.

But I knew where he was. After two more days, I went out the back way, made it to the corner like all the other times, and hailed a cab. Ten minutes later it dropped me off on State Street in front of the Emporium of Wonders. The door was locked, the windows were empty, and there was a sign on the door: *Moved to a New Location*. But it didn't say where the location *was*.

I tried the yellow pages. No luck. I tried the white pages too. Hell, if there'd have been mauve or puce pages, I'd have tried *them* too. I spent the next two weeks wandering the area, asking every person I saw if they knew what had become of Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders. They were polite at first, but pretty soon they started looking at me like I was the local nut case, and they turned and began walking away whenever they saw me approaching.

I stayed in the Hector McPherson Retirement Home for seven more months. Since I had a two-bedroom apartment they kept trying to give me a new roommate, but Gold and Silver had been a team since before any of them were born and I wasn't about to adjust to a new partner.

Then came the day I'd known was coming. The doctor hemmed and hawed, and then laid it on me: the cancer had reappeared in my one remaining lung. I asked how long I had. He tiptoed around it for a few minutes, then said anywhere from three weeks to three months. I wasn't even sorry; nine decades is a long time, longer than most have, and life hadn't been much fun since Maury had left.

It was getting harder to breathe, harder to get around. Then I read in the paper that they were bringing *Casablanca* back to a small theatre in what used to be Old Town, the beatnik/then-hippie/then-yuppie area a couple of miles north of the Loop. It had played on TV a couple of trillion times, but this would be its first commercial showing on a big screen in almost forty years, and I thought to myself: where better to die than

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watching Bogey and Claude Rains go off into the unknown to cement their friendship and fight the Bad Guys, just the way Maury and I day-dreamed when we were kids?

I became obsessed with the notion that that was how and where I wanted to die. I waited a few more days, until I barely had the strength to climb down the stairs. Then, when the nurses and attendants were all performing their various duties, I walked out the front door, and waited for the cab I'd phoned. (I wasn't sure I'd have the strength to stand out there in the cold and flag one down.)

I gave the cabbie the address of the theatre, and he dropped me off there fifteen minutes later. I gave him a twenty, stuffed a ten for the movie and another twenty (just in case I didn't die and needed a ride home) in my shirt pocket, and walked to the ticket window. When I got there I stopped and turned around, to take one last look at the world—

—And that's when I saw it, nestled between an old-fashioned green-grocer and a little hardware shop: Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders. I walked across the street and peered in the window. It looked exactly like the last shop. I studied the door for a long moment, then finally opened it and walked in.

"Master Silver," said Baffle, looking totally unsurprised as I entered the place. "What kept you?"

"Life," I wheezed.

"It does slow people down," he agreed, and he sounded sympathetic rather than intimidating. "Well, come in out of the cold. Someone's been waiting for you."

"Maury?"

He nodded. "I had my doubts, but he assured me that sooner or later you'd show up."

A young boy who looked oddly familiar entered from the back of the shop. He smiled at me, and I knew I'd seen that smile a million times before.

"Maury?" I said, half amazed, half frightened.

"Hi, Nate," he said. "I knew you'd come."

"What happened to you?"

"I'm working here now," he said. "Full time."

"But you're an old man!"

"You know what they say," he replied. "You're only as old as you feel. And me, I feel like I'm twelve years, three months, and twenty-two days old." He smiled again. "That's how old I was the day we met. And now we're meeting again."

"Just briefly," I said, getting ready to tell him about the cancer. "I got the bad news last week."

"Then it's last week's news, and nothing is older than that," said Maury with no show of concern.

"I must feed the Denebian Spider-Cats," announced Baffle. "I'll leave you two friends to visit in private for a few moments."

I stared at Maury. "Didn't you understand what I said? The cancer's in the other lung. They've given me three months, tops."

"Why don't you ask Alastair what *he* can give you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Look at me, Nate," he said. "I'm not an illusion. I'm twelve years old. He did it for me. He can do it for you, too. I've asked him to hold a job open for you."

"A job?" I repeated, frowning.

"A *lifetime* job," he said meaningfully. "And around here, there's no telling how long that can be. Look at him. You know he once saw George Washington ride by?"

"You better hope he was lying, Maury," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, confused.

"Don't you understand just how long you have to serve him?"

"You make it sound like I'm a slave," he complained. "I *love* working here. He teaches me things."

"What kind of things?"

"You'd call them tricks, but they're not."

"You'd better come back with me, Maury."

"So I can rot in my wheelchair while I'm going blind?" he said. "So I can't even pick up a pencil without my hand feeling like it's on fire? If I stay here I can be healthy forever!"

"Do you know just how long forever is?" I shot back. "Did you just sign the contract without reading the fine print? How long will it take you to pay off your debt to him? When will you be free to leave?"

"I don't *want* to leave!" he half-shouted. "What's out there besides pain and suffering?"

"*Everything's* out there," I answered. "Pain and suffering are just a small part of it. They're dues we pay to enjoy the good stuff."

"The good stuff's over for sick old men like us," said Maury. "You shouldn't be trying to talk me out of staying here. I should be trying to get you to join me."

"It feels like cheating, Maury. If there's a God, I'm going to be seeing Him pretty soon, and I plan to do it with a clear conscience. We never cheated at business, I never cheated on my wives, and I'm not about to start cheating now."

"You're looking at it all wrong," he insisted. "If you don't stay with me, you'll be cheating yourself." He paused. "I don't know how long he'll hold the job open, Nate. I don't think he likes you very much."

"I can live with that."

"Damn it, Nate! You're walking around with one lung, and it's got cancer! You *can't* live with it! You can't live with anything. Come on while you have the chance. We can be Gold and Silver again for another lifetime!"

"I'm not through with *this* lifetime," I said. "Maybe I've only got three months. Maybe they'll come up with a new form of chemo, or some other new treatment. Life's always been a crapshoot, Maury. I've played by the rules so far; I'm not changing now."

"So what if they cure you?" he said. "They'll give you another eight months. He can give you eight *decades*."

Baffle re-entered the front of the shop just then. "I assume Master Gold has spoken to you about a position here?" he said.

"You don't want a sick, tired old man," I said.

"That's true," he replied. "I have no use for a sick, tired old man." He paused. "But I can always use a young, healthy one."

"I wish you luck in finding the right one," I said. "But it's not me. And now I think I'd better be going."

"Without your trick?" asked Baffle.

"I'll have to take a pass on it," I said. "I've got just enough cash with me for the movie across the street and cab fare home."

"Then you can owe it to me." He reached into the air and produced a single red rose, then handed it to me. "Careful of the thorns," he cautioned.

"I saw you do this the very first time I visited your shop," I said.

"No, Master Silver," he said. "Each time is different. Smell the fragrance."

"I can't," I said, indicating my oxygen supply.

He reached over before I could stop him, grabbed the oxygen away, and tossed it in a wastebasket. "We don't allow oxygen around here, Master Silver. It's too combustible."

I was all set to grab my throat and start gasping for air, but nothing happened except that I took a deep breath. It felt good. Hell, it felt *great*.

"Now how does it smell?"

I lifted the rose to my nose. "Beautiful," I said in wonderment.

"You owe me a dollar the next time you visit the shop."

"Nate," said Maury, "are you sure you won't stay?"

"I can't," I said. "Are you sure you won't go?"

He shook his head.

I didn't know whether to shake his hand or hug him, so I just stared at him, fixing his face in my memory one last time, and then I walked out the door.

I went in to start my treatment two days later. The doctors took a bunch of CATscans and X-rays, blood tests and readings, and left me sitting there for hours. Finally the head of the team came out and told me that their initial diagnosis had been mistaken, that I didn't have cancer after all.

The next morning I took a cab to the shop to pay Baffle his dollar. There was a sign in the window: *Moved to a new location*.

I keep looking. Not to take him up on his offer, just to pay him what I owed him, and maybe see Maury one more time and find out how he was doing. I heard Baffle had opened a store on Morse Avenue in the Rogers Park section of the city, but when I got there he'd moved again.

Someone told me that a new magic shop opened down in Hyde Park, in the University area, and as soon as I'm up to it I'll go down and see for myself. It'll probably be gone by then. I don't think he wants me to find him. Maybe he's afraid I've changed my mind. As for me, I don't know what I'd say to them—the man who happily sold his soul, and the man who bought it.

But I'd give one of my remaining months just to take one last look around Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders. ○

THE WHALE'S LOVER

Deborah Coates

Deb Coates lives in Ames, Iowa, and works in information technology. Recent sales include stories to *Asimov's*, *Year's Best Fantasy*, and *Strange Horizons*. Her third tale to appear here takes place on a distant planet and is the most straightforward science fiction story she's done for us.

They have come to Pretoria to hunt the leviathan.

"Prep for landing in five," Fallon says to Tish when he finally finds her in the observation lounge where she has spent most of the out-journey to Pretoria.

"I'm fine," Tish says. It's what she always says when she isn't really listening.

The beacon picks them up at three hundred and brings them in quick and easy. There are no major land masses on Pretoria. The largest island is less than two hundred fifty thousand square kilometers. The port city itself claims only twenty-five hundred semi-permanent inhabitants. There's little fertile soil; big winter storms make it impossible to live on the planet at all for seven months of a long year. Half the residents shift to an orbital. The other half take outbound cargo contracts, drifting back when it's time to drop planetside again. Pretoria is the end of the universe. No one would live here at all if they weren't hiding from something or waiting for their fortune to be made.

Two hours after landing, Tish is back in the observation lounge. She looks down at the heat-rippled concourse and watches the rest of the crew disappear through the gates, headed for the nearest port bar and a night of drinking and other low pleasures before the real work begins.

"Look familiar?"

Tish turns to see Fallon standing in the doorway. She crosses her arms and leans against the curving observation panels. They are cool against her back, like water over ice. It is Tish's third trip to Pretoria, Fallon's fourth. The last two trips, Tish never left the harbor. Those times, with a different

captain, they arrived too late in the season. Fallon has been on the water three times before, but never landed a leviathan. He is thin on capital; he will be ruined if this trip isn't successful. Tish hasn't asked him if he has enough set aside to take them off-world at the end. She doesn't really care.

Fallon crosses the observation lounge and stands too close to her. Tish would like him farther away, but she doesn't want to give ground to him. She can feel without touching how desperation casts a thin layer over everything else he feels. It is to Fallon's credit, though, that it doesn't bend his thinking. He will take the risks he has to take. He will sink what must be sunk. And if he doesn't survive the leviathan, well, then, he hopes that the leviathan doesn't survive him either.

He leans a hand against the curving panels and looks out past the port and the low slung buildings of the town to the ocean that owns nearly all of Pretoria. Gray-blue waves crash against the rocks with a pounding force that Tish can feel even onboard ship a mile or more away, like a thrumming pressure against her breastbone.

"It won't be like you imagine," Fallon says.

"I don't imagine," Tish replies.

Fallon smiles at her. He is a square man, broad-shouldered and stocky, and looks like he spends his days on the bridge of an ancient sailing vessel, though he was born in space and has spent more hours there than on land. Tish doesn't know much about him, except she sees him in the observation lounge at odd hours, programming intricate patterns on delicate Starsian shadow boards that he erases when he is finished.

"You should have gone with the others," he says to her now. "We could be out for months."

Tish shrugs. She isn't here to be social.

Fallon looks at her for awhile without speaking, then shrugs and leaves. Tish turns her gaze back to the ocean.

Tish is here to call the leviathan. She paid half the cash she has to sit in a dingy room on a half-populated planet three systems over and listen to a crazy woman with tangled hair and eyes that looked as if they'd been bleached white by salt and sun and ocean.

"They are bigger than you can imagine," the woman said. "Not just their bodies, which are big in a way that your mind can't register. The mind recoils; you can't, up close, see the whole of a leviathan at all. But the thing I'm talking about, what matters, what you have to be prepared for, is inside," and she tapped the side of her head. "Inside, leviathan is the biggest thing you've ever known."

Tish has no special psychic abilities. She tested low back in school for everything—for empathy and queuing and even simple reads. But she has been told that none of that matters. What she needs, the crazy woman says, is a willingness to lose herself in the other. Tish doesn't quite understand what that means, but she wants, more than anything, to lose herself and she hopes that this will be the way that she can do it.

Toward the end of the day and a half session, someone asked about the mer. "Is it true some people . . . is it true they stay . . . they become—?"

"No one knows," the woman said. "Once," she began, but then her voice trailed off. "You get lost out there," she said, her voice suddenly rough, "so

easily—so easy. And you think . . . you start to think the world has been offered up to you. You think you've touched the sky. And maybe . . . maybe some people do. Maybe they find something real and—and whole." She stopped talking abruptly and turned away toward the bank of windows that looked out on dirty city streets and gray storm-banked sky. She stood like that for a long time until the members of the class began to shift in their seats and look at one another. Finally, she waved an arm at them and said, "That's all for today," in a thick voice without turning around.

Later that night, when Tish walked down to the riverfront looking for a place to eat, she saw her instructor again, standing on the bank, her hair even wilder, tangled by the evening wind. Tish started toward her, meaning to ask her a question about leviathan feeding habits, but as she neared, she noticed that although the woman was completely still, tears poured unrelentingly down her cheeks. Tish had nothing to offer her, no way to deflect all that pain; she turned away abruptly and when she was far enough away that she was sure the instructor wouldn't see her, she ran.

Tish leaves the observation area and walks through the empty ship—even Fallon has disappeared somewhere. Her footsteps echo off steel walls and she's sorry now that she didn't go with the others for some late night port-side drinking. Not that they invited her. She has never quite gotten on with them.

Tish is up at dawn the next day and outside not much later, ready to begin. Before they can hunt the leviathan, they have to dismantle half their space ship and turn it into an ocean-going vessel. Tish wants to get it done, to get out there on the ocean, to do her job and . . . well, she doesn't know exactly what comes after that, hopes in fact that she will be a different person after, someone who has left her past behind. She doesn't sleep anymore, except in random snatches. She dreams every night. Usually the dreams are all about blood and screaming and running, just running with no hope and nowhere to go and—but last night the dreams were quiet, peaceful with a deep voice that spoke so smooth and true it set up a humming underneath her breastbone. She couldn't understand anything the voice was saying; she couldn't find its source. But she knew it was all right, that everything always, forever would be all right.

She is already tackling the hold latches when Fallon and the rest of the crew join her. The old hands fall in without a word; Kelly climbs the hull like he was born among the trees of AlphaTerra and rigs a line for lowering the smaller sections. Kelly lost four fingers hunting leviathans—not lost to the leviathan, lost when his ship was boarded by another crew bent on swiping the thing that makes leviathan worth hunting far beyond the price of oil—iridescent crystals found, when one is lucky, in the liver of the creatures. An entire crew's fortune for a lifetime can be made on just five leviathan crystals.

Frisco-Wallace runs a servocart out of the main hold and directs Patrick and toaLua to start loading. Everyone has a job, space-born animosity falls away. Tish feels good for the first time in a long time; sweat clings to the small of her back and plasters her short hair against her neck. She wishes this—just this—could last forever.

They finish stripping the ship by noon. The holds lie exposed, metal gird-

ers give the ship shape with no covering, like an ancient beast gone to bones. The upper levels are still intact—bridge and sleeping quarters. The three main holds carried the snap-in, titanium and polyalloy superstructure for their ocean-going ship. Two of the six main engines and half the electronics, along with another bundle of shipped parts, will complete the new ship. If they don't return intact, their space craft will never leave the planet.

If they don't return with a leviathan, they will have no reason to leave.

Tish works with toaLua in the afternoon, scaling the snap-in superstructure and holding the light strong framing pieces while he tightens them in. He stares at her without speaking. In an old life, she would have snapped at him, "What! Why are you staring?" But there is something about it, as if she deserves to be stared at, as if everyone and especially he knows who she is and what she's done. His gaze isn't accusatory or angry, though, simply assessing.

As the afternoon progresses, their smooth rhythm acquires a familiarity all its own and she doesn't quite notice, or pretends not to, at least, when he starts touching her more often than he needs to. It feels right, the touching, part of the lifting and moving and building.

Fallon calls a halt at sundown and pronounces himself satisfied with their progress. "If this weather holds, we'll be on the ocean tomorrow," he says. Tish knows that he is as happy as it's possible for him to be. He will have managed Pretoria—getting there—and the ocean—getting on it—while there is still half a season's hunting left. Tish considers celebrating this simple fact with the others tonight down at the portside bars. But . . . she stops halfway along the path from the harbor back to the skeletal remains of their space ship . . . she can't. She just can't and she can't explain it to them.

Someone approaches her from behind. A hand on her shoulder, and toaLua is speaking softly in her ear, "You are fine?"

She knows that she should shake him off, but she doesn't. It feels good, as it did earlier this afternoon, someone touching her again. She wants that, desperately, wants back the things she's lost. She closes her eyes and leans into his hand, just for a fraction of a second—a second can't make a difference, she tells herself. She opens her eyes and takes a step away from him. "I'm fine," she says.

"I will come back with you," he offers.

She shrugs and doesn't tell him yes or no. He adjusts his stride to hers and they walk in something approaching companionable silence back to the ship. The others have all veered off to the dockside bars and it's just the two of them, alone. At some point, he puts his hand on her wrist and she doesn't shrug him off.

She does and doesn't realize that he is drawing her away from the main path, down toward the beach, back to the water. The double moons are high in the sky already and the beach glows, as if the sand is lit from within. The tide is half-high and the water, washing ashore in shallow waves, sounds urgent and relentless. Tish is assailed by a rush of longing so great she can hardly bear it. She grabs toaLua and pushes him onto the sand. Grabbing his shirt in her fists and pushing it up, she presses her face against his muscular chest and breathes in his scent—sweat laced over with some spice she doesn't know.

He laughs and grabs at her. "You always want," he says. She doesn't know what he means. She doesn't care. She wants for this moment to exist separate from the past, separate from the future. She wants to have no guilt, no hopes, no debts to pay or pasts to redeem. Just here. Just now.

The waves break. She kneels in front of toaLua and pulls her shirt over her head. He grins at her and reaches for her hand. Their coupling is slow and languid, out of rhythm with the waves and yet somehow in harmony with them too. Half-tide rises to nearly full; water licks at their ankles. Tish dreams without knowing that she's sleeping.

She is in water. She is naked and floating and so relaxed that she feels as if the world has emptied out her insides and left nothing but peace behind. She waits because that's all she has to do. Wait. Just wait.

Then he comes. He is huge, but huge is not the right word. Big, large, enormous, giant are words that describe nothing. They are inadequate to the task of description, as if they have never had meaning. He is larger than suns, more massive than solar systems, infinite beyond universes. He pauses and looks at her with his giant eye, but he doesn't want her. She is too small, too broken.

She cries and only realizes after she begins that she is not crying because she will not be able to touch him, will not be touched by him. She cries because her life has come here, to this. She cries because the past cannot be changed, because she didn't understand this when it mattered, because she will never be huge like ancient suns, because. . . .

"Forgive me." The voice is unexpected. Human and yet not-human. It rumbles against her chest, hums against her bones. It is ancient and young, hollow and vigorous. It vibrates hard against her and she doesn't know what it means. Forgive him? Forgive what? He has done nothing to her or for her or with her. He moves and the water he displaces is so massive that she finds herself riding a wave that builds and builds and carries her higher and higher as if somehow, simply by staying, she will touch the roof of the world.

"Forgive."

She opens her eyes. toaLua is above her, brushing her hair from her face. The tide has come up high enough that waves wash over their legs. "What?" she blinks her eyes and levers herself up awkwardly on her elbows.

"I'm sorry," he says. "You were crying."

She brushes her hand across her cheek and pushes herself away from him. "I'm all right," she says, though he has not asked her a question.

A picture flashes into her head: her sister running—running—toward her, lifting her—she must have been young, though she does not remember when this happened—and spinning her around in her arms. "We're free!" her sister says in the picture in Tish's mind. But they weren't. They just didn't know it then.

She rises and picks her shirt off the ground, shaking sand from its folds. The double moons have arced halfway across the sky. They are near full and the light they cast shines silver on the ocean and flat gold on the ochre sand. toaLua comes up behind her. He doesn't say anything, but he puts his hands on her waist and leans close to her. An evening wind lifts

off the water, cooler than the surrounding air. It plays at the damp ends of Tish's hair. She wishes this moment would last, the quiet and the calm ocean, the lifting breeze, the touch of another person.

A sharp shout breaks the moment. Tish and toaLua step apart. Laughter echoes just beyond the dunes and they lunge back to their clothes, struggling into trousers and boots. Tish ducks her head sideways, unwilling to look at him now, not sure what she was thinking when she came here with him, wanting nothing except to get back to the bright artificial port lights, back to the world she knows, where the past defines her, where she touches nothing and prays every morning when she wakes that nothing will touch her.

It is two more days until Fallon declares the ship seaworthy and files for permission to launch. The inspection takes an additional half day. The crew, left with nothing much to do, spends the afternoon on the beach at low tide. Apon has brought a bottle of spirits she's been hoarding the entire trip.

"Leviathan!" she shouts and tips the bottle up and drinks until liquid trails out of the corners of her mouth and down her chin. She passes the bottle to the others and everyone takes a drink. The bottle comes to Tish who is sitting a little apart from the others, but still within the glow of the bonfire they've built. She tips the bottle up and feels the fiery liquid burn down her throat and lick like fire to the tips of her fingers and toes. She remembers years ago a beach bonfire with her sister, sitting in the near dark as the season shifted out of summer while her sister explained in plain and simple terms how the world was about to change.

Apon grabs the empty bottle from Tish's hand and flings it deep into the surf. It is her invitation to the leviathan—a message to tell them she is coming.

Fallon rises and makes a speech. toaLua slips around the circle and slides in behind Tish. She lets him touch her; she welcomes the distraction. The evening fades into a soft blur. Tish remembers walking on sand, water lapping at her feet, the touch of a hand, rock still warm from the afternoon sun. Not thinking . . . not dreaming . . .

"Forgive me."

She is on the beach. The sky sparks with a thousand thousand pinpricks. The sand is a lighter shade of dark than the night sky, the ocean darker still, flashing silver occasionally in the moonlight. The waves are utterly silent and unreal. Tish turns around and her breath catches in her throat.

Her sister is standing behind her.

She starts to reach out but stops. This can't be real. Her sister's hair whips across her face and she brushes it away.

"Forgive me," her sister says.

Tish feels a sharp pain deep in her chest, like something has stabbed her right between her ribs. She can't catch her breath, just short gasps, as if she's drowning. Her sister's dress billows and flutters, though Tish herself can't feel the wind. The dress is a deep, deep red, like crimson, like the last time she saw her sister, like—

She wakes up screaming on the beach.

She looks around and she is alone, half a mile or more from where they had the bonfire. Her shirt is lying wet on the sands behind her. She grabs

it and pulls it over her head without even bothering to shake loose the sand. Her hands are shaking and her head is pounding though she doesn't think it's from the drinking. She closes her eyes and images spin, kaleidoscopic behind her eyes. She falls and doesn't even realize it until her back thumps into the packed sand.

He is there, in every image, so big she can't really see him. Her sister is there too, sometimes in the crimson dress, sometimes in white, sometimes just there, like she was when Tish was young. But he, he is unchanging. And Tish knows that he knows that she is coming.

Back at the ship the loading is nearly done.

"You okay?" Fallon asks her.

"Are you fine?" toaLua echoes, his head tilted to the side as if he actually cares, though she knows that he doesn't. How could he care? He doesn't know her. She's not even sure she knows herself. Her sister stayed and fought. Tish ran away. That's her story and she's sticking to it. Her story is all she has.

Five days at sea and they have seen nothing. At least, they have seen massive schools of fish, several different species of aquatic mammals, birds that live all their lives on the ocean. But they have spotted no leviathan. Apon says this is not unusual. Fallon says he expected it.

Tish can feel the leviathan; she dreams about him every night. It's the same one every time, though she doesn't have any idea how she knows. She can't ever see all of him, he is too huge—his eye alone is higher than the tallest tower she has ever seen—but she knows that it is him. She can feel him when she's awake, as if he is right underneath the boat, a silent massive shadow that doesn't show on any scanner, hundreds of feet below them, maybe, but there, like a weight that only Tish can feel.

The ship, which they have named *Hunde*, is equipped for a six month journey, putting them, if they are not successful early on, back on land at the tail end of the season, risking massive storms and sea and crashing waves on the rocky shore. The ship is designed for limited sub-surface travel—useful only in desperate emergencies and not very useful then.

Three weeks out and Tish spends her days in the crow's nest, high above the decks. He talks to her, even when she's awake—or thinks that she's awake. His mouth is so huge, the sounds pitched so low, she can't hear him, can't understand, but she knows that he's speaking. And she knows that what he's saying, if she could only hear it, would both make her whole and destroy her.

Her sister is in her dreams, too. Tish tries not to see her, but when the leviathan comes, she can no longer look away. Her sister wears black, her hair swept back, and she is laughing. She looks as she always looked to Tish, except that she has grown. She is the size of the leviathan, though the leviathan is so big that Tish can't see him and her sister is knowable—compassionate and brave.

"We had to do it," her sister says to her. "I hope you understand. I hope that you forgive me." Tish wants to run away. She doesn't want to hear it. But every night she dreams, every night her sister comes, and every night Tish wakes, crying, because the past will never change.

"Shadows."

Frisco-Wallace says one word and Fallon is there immediately. They have been at sea six weeks. They have seen evidence of two other ships, one on its way back to port with enough leviathan crystals to bankroll an army, one returning with nothing. Fallon has become short-tempered. He stalks the deck day and night as if staring unceasingly at the horizon will bring the leviathan to him. He only comes inside to gaze at the trackers and run numbers on the screens in his cabin.

"Where?" he asks. "Are you sure?"

"They're just shadows," Frisco-Wallace says with a shrug. "But, damn, they're big."

The crew, which has been slumped in inactivity, moves with enthusiasm to their jobs. Fallon pulls Tish aside.

"Are you ready for this?" he asks her.

"I can do it," Tish tells him after a short silence. She figures she should be excited, her heart pounding in her chest. This is why she is here, what she has come for. To go out alone into the ocean and call the leviathan. But Tish knows something Fallon doesn't. She doesn't have to call the leviathan. Because the leviathan is calling her.

That night, toaLua breaks out a hoarded bottle of whiskey and comes to her quarters, knocking shyly on her door. She has been avoiding him since they put to sea, not purposefully, but because she keeps forgetting that he's there. The sound of the leviathan grows louder all the time and she can't always see or hear what's right in front of her.

When she first met toaLua she thought him nothing more than a brash boy relying on an abruptness that he somehow manages to make charming. But now she recognizes kindness in him and a certain awkward gentleness. He would love her if she let him, despite the fact that he sees in her what she refuses to see in herself. "Trouble follows you," he told her their first night at sea when he found her on the deck, head lifted to the stars.

"I ran away," she said, turning to face him.

toaLua's eyes were dark against the moonless night, his face caught in planes and shadows. "No, you didn't," he said calmly. He reached out to her, but she tripped on a carelessly stored emergency buoy and the clatter brought Fallon and Apon and Frisco-Wallace up on deck to see what was happening.

Tonight, after they have consumed two-thirds of the whiskey, after the others, all except Apon, have drifted below deck, Tish puts her hand on toaLua's knee. "I know," she says. "But . . . but I can't—" The words choke in her throat.

toaLua's hand closes over hers. "When you come back," he says. "Then you will tell me how trouble follows you."

Tish nods, but in that moment, just the way he says the words—"when you come back"—she realizes that there is some doubt in her mind that she will actually return.

She launches at first light. The crew are all on deck to watch her leave, half of them busy, like they don't want to care too much that she is heading out, that succeed or fail, it has all come to this, that Tish will call the leviathan and it will come, or not, that nothing they do will make a difference right now. toaLua has climbed the mast and is perching in the

crow's nest. She doesn't look, but she knows he's there, that he will watch her until he can't see her any longer. She knows now that he is a better man than she first thought him. But she can't care for him or see any path into the future that involves her and toaLua anywhere but here, on this planet, right now.

She knows that she should be frightened, alone on the big ocean waiting for the big creature, who could swallow her whole if it wanted to. But she feels . . . calm, as if days and months and years have led to this. She is headed toward the shadows they saw on the scanner, but she knows that it's unnecessary. The leviathan is beneath her, has been there all the time.

For a day and a half she motors steadily across the ocean. Out here, away from everyone, she discovers that at last there is nowhere left to hide. Her sister is always in her dreams. She appears even before the dark massive ever-present leviathan.

"Forgive me," her sister says. She says it every time Tish dreams. And every time she says it, it breaks Tish's heart a little more.

"I can't," Tish says. Tears run down her face and suddenly it is raining as if her tears have overrun the heavens. "I can't. You don't know what you're asking."

Her sister's gaze is compassionate, her red dress fades to a white shirt and dark trousers, her hair pulled back from her face, her feet bare. "Yes," she says softly, "I do."

Tish doesn't know how to call the leviathan, despite the class, despite her assurances to Fallon. She strips naked and stands on the deck of her tiny boat and raises her arms to the heavens. She thinks perhaps she will never go back, she will stay here in the middle of the ocean. Maybe if she stays forever in the middle of nowhere time will literally stop, and she will never need to go forward or backward again.

She sleeps on the seventh day, or maybe the eighth—she's lost track of time and yesterday nearly forgot to check in with Fallon and the others, until the alarm on the communicator grew so annoying she had to answer it.

"Are you okay out there?" Fallon had asked her. "Maybe we should pull you in."

"No!" Tish said. Then, quieter, "I think that I can see them."

"Really?" There is a sharp excitement in Fallon's voice that he can't quite hide. "You can see them?"

Tish cuts the connection. She can't, really, see leviathan on the horizon, but she knows they are there.

Her sister is with her all the time now.

"Forgive me," her sister whispers in her ear.

"No," says Tish. "You know," she adds.

"Do you?" her sister whispers.

"Yes." Tish can see a gray cloud on the horizon. "Yes," she says, "I know."

The ocean rises in a rolling swell as the leviathan approaches. The sun appears and disappears behind wisps of clouds. A fresh morning wind lifts the hair on Tish's neck. She can feel the boat rock beneath her feet as she stands to meet her monster.

This is the story: that her sister left home and joined the revolution, that the government came looking for her, that Tish turned her in—out of fear, out of righteousness, out of cold-blooded calculation—she doesn't know anymore. The revolution failed. Her sister died in prison.

This is the truth: Tish didn't run away while her sister stayed. Running away would have been heroic compared to what she really did. She betrayed her sister to save herself.

The leviathan is beneath her boat now. The tiny craft tilts and bobs as it rides the fast-moving swell. Tish strips off her clothes and jumps into the water. The ocean closes in around her, cool and warm at the same time. She dives deeper, but at first she sees nothing, just ocean and the watery glint of sunlight.

She surfaces and waits. She knows that he will come. He is her leviathan. She was supposed to call him, but he is calling her, has called her all the way out here to the middle of the ocean. It means something, she thinks, that he called her. It has to mean something.

Then she feels it. He is coming. She wants to see all of him; she wishes she could fly.

Something brushes her foot, the merest touch, like the lightest feather or the gentlest breeze.

"Forgive me." Her sister's voice returns, whispering in her ear.

The unexpected voice startles Tish and a wave slaps her face. Coughing, she tries to reply, though she can feel the leviathan now—it's as if he is suddenly everywhere—in her head, in her heart, in her skin. "I can't—" she can't even say the words—forgive, forgiveness—"I betrayed you," she says. "I killed you." She chokes on the words, as if she has swallowed the sea.

The leviathan nudges her feet. She is amazed that his touch is so gentle, so light. She wants to duck down beneath the waves. She wants to swim with him through endless oceans. She wants to make love to him in sea foam and sunlight. She wants him to love her, to notice she's there, to tell her the universe forgives her for what she's done, to tell her he forgives her.

Suddenly he is directly underneath her, so massive his body doesn't even curve beneath her feet. He lifts her up, straight out of the water, higher and higher and higher. She is exhilarated and sad at the same time, both emotions so huge that her mind can scarcely encompass them. She wants to take the universe back, to come here clean and whole, to embrace the leviathan as a whole person, not someone who never really lived.

She told herself when the government came for her sister that she had no choice. She told herself they would have found her sister anyway, they would have killed her anyway. She told herself if she hadn't done it, she would have died too. She told herself a lifetime of lies, thinking she could hide the truth.

The leviathan lifts her so high she can see the *Hunde* far, far away, nearly on the horizon. She knows that they are coming, that her time is limited. That she must leave the leviathan, that he must leave her.

The past will never change, no matter how far she runs, no matter what lies she tells herself. It can only be accepted. It can only be what it is.

The leviathan reaches the top of its arc; Tish can feel his body shift, as he begins to descend.

"Forgive me," the leviathan says as he enters the water.

"I forgive you," Tish says and dives with him into the depths of the endless sea. ○

THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee's 2007 publications included the last book in her Lionwolf trilogy, *No Flame But Mine* (Macmillan), *Piratica 3* (Hodder), and *Indigara*, a young-adult novella out from Firebird. She tells us two current projects on the violent Bronze Age and Futurist Polluted Cities "are still being researched and constructed." Her latest tale takes a disturbing and violent look at the effects a deadly new plague could have on human society.

A man had collapsed in the airport. They were dealing with it in the usual efficient way. It had taken so long to get in through the front-line tome security, and they tried to hustle me on like the rest when I paused to see. I blazed my PI card. They backed away then and let me watch.

God, he was a handsome guy. I mean, he was truly beautiful, the man being lifted on to the trolley. Gold hair, unlined tan of skin, perfect weight—looked like he could run for the Olympian at St. Max. But he was barely conscious now, though softly whimpering, and they'd already set up the float-drip to feed him pain relief and rehydration. His eyes were shut.

The nearest medic glanced at me. "Seen enough? Just stick around," she snapped. Her voice and eyes were full of controlled rage. She wasn't wearing a medi-mask, and she was rather special-looking herself.

I took the elevator up to the next stage of security (heightened now), and another long wait. I was glad I'd brought a book.

They are pretty tight, the tomes. Enclosed runway and landing area, outer airlock, double inner airlock, frisker, and then every robo-check known to mankind, plus all the extra ones installed during the past seven months. Iris-reading, prints, bone-marrow stat, DNA, blood and phy stat, skull-template. Molecular shower. Absolvment.

Going the other way, the treatment is even more complex. Four and three quarter hours as opposed to the three needed going in. But who's aiming to leave? Aside, of course, from people like me.

"Hi, Jack."

Good old Edmund Kovalchy. There he was, just the same as ever, twenty to twenty-five pounds overweight, and bald as a balloon.

He led me down the block and into the diner.

It was only around noon, not a lot of custom yet. And there wouldn't be, he assured me, until much later in the day, when citizens surfaced from the haze and made it here for a dunch. Only a couple of diehards sat at tables far off across the big shadowy room, an old woman with green hair scribbling on a notepad, a decanter and glass beside her, and a feller in one corner, who was working his way through the kind of breakfast I—and Ed—used to regularly take when we were twenty-four: double steak, triple egg, mushrooms, carrash, hashes, and a separate big bowl of fries.

"Each to his own poison."

"Sure," I said. The two people looked okay. "How are you doing, Edmund, my man?"

"Fine," he said, grinning. "Gained two extra pounds, so the weight-winner tells me. Oh, and I reckon my very last scalp hair resigned last night. Found it on the pillow. Marianna said that deserved a coffee cake. So she's baking one. You are welcome to drop by around nine tonight, if you can make a break, sample the same."

We paused awhile, thinking respectfully of Marianna's coffee cake. Funny the way little things hold you.

But his eyes were sad.

Of course they were.

It was only a couple of weeks ago.

"How's she taking it, Ed?"

"She's a warrior, Jack. Y'know that."

"I know."

The service wheeled over, and we ordered sandwiches, some rye whiskey for Ed, and a tumbler of fresh orange for me. "Got to watch it till later."

"Sure, sure. Make up for it then."

"Like half the city," I said.

Maybe I shouldn't have, should have waited. But Ed is one of my oldest friends. We go back such a long way, sometimes I can barely count the dips in the road between now and then. But some of them were steep. And we made it, Ed and I, and Marianna.

"How is it?" he asked me, serious, looking up from his glass. "Any progress?"

"Not much."

"I thought not," he said. We're in the same business. His Corp clearance is *omega*. No need to lie, and in fact I couldn't. One of the reasons I was here to see him was to link him in, put him wise. I reached over and laid the little disc, only about the size of a quarter, next to the bottle. "For your eyes only."

"Yeah." He slid it into the secure pocket. "My eyes though, Jack, have seen a great many things in this city during the past sixteen weeks."

"Sure."

"What goes out on TV-wide?"

"Not a lot. They edit. To spare the Sensitive Viewer."

He let go a loud gout of laughter which startled me. I had every reason to think he might act unstable, but somehow Ed, of anyone—I'd thought he would handle it. In another second he did. "Sorry, chum. Just makes me angry."

"It does." And it does. Some angry, some sad, and some very afraid.

"Aren't they doing a frigging thing?" Now his voice was soft, and his sad eyes fixed only on the whiskey.

"They are trying. But—"

I broke off. And he, not even turning, knew at once why I did.

"Some of them—one of them has come in," he said, "right?"

"That's right."

"Gal or guy?"

"Guy."

"Look like trouble?"

"Not yet."

"Christ," he said. "He's early. Most of 'em don't shift until late afternoon—why would they? How far is he along?"

"Looks a way."

Ed turned slowly and squinted back into the light where the doorway gave on the sidewalk. He took a brief visual camera shot of what I had seen, a man apparently around thirty-four, built of lean muscle, and with black hair hung to his collar. He was dressed okay, which sometimes they are not, some of them. Especially later, when plenty came out flaunting naked. The man laughed when he saw us looking. Then walked, easy, to our table.

"Hi, fellers."

"Sorry," Ed mumbled.

"S'okay. Don't blame you. And after all, you never know. You may still be able to stare at me next Thanksgiving."

As he strode off to the service bar, our sandwiches arrived. Only the woman with the green hair stood up and left, walking out with the decanter of yellow wine half-full in her hand.

I was never the pretty one. Ugly duckling, me. Used to upset Mom more than me, I think. I think she made me self-conscious.

My nose was too big, and my mouth—fat, and my eyes not big enough, and my hair too fine and greasy. And diet all I would, still too heavy. The humiliation of the school scales. And then the weight-loser. Every other kid sloughing off the fat, and poor Gane. Hey, Gane's *gained* another pound!

Lay off the Chocostars, they told me. Never believed I didn't eat them anyway.

Metabolic weight, they said, when I was an anorexic twenty-year-old, losing my hair and weighing in at one hundred and seventy-six pounds.

You're too fat, said Mel, when he ditched me and I was thirty.

You fat cow, said Martin, when he left me the day after my fortieth birthday.

And then, last year. Fall. Then.

Just a little thing.

Hey, Gane! You've finally cracked it! In fall, seven pounds fall from me, like leaves.

"What shampoo is that, Gane? Say, your hair is *brilliant*."

This, about two months before they fix on the dome.

After Ed and I split, I took a cab over to Memphis Street. The driver was full of it.

"Y'know what I think it is?" A prompting pause.

"What do you think it is?"

"It's these new pump aerosols."

"Right. How's that?"

"Well, buddy. Ya spray the darn things all over. Some folks gonna react. What ya expect."

I expect to hear the theory of every man I meet who isn't creeping through a shadow or beating out his brain on a wall. And I've heard plenty. It's the ME block. It's terrorism-funded. It's extra-terrestrials. It's feral crops that have grown legs and glowing eyes, and run through the night snarling. It's vampires. So: Angry, sad, scared—and stupid. Just plain dumb.

The front for the Corp building on Memphis is a deli, and I climbed up the old paper-screws of fifty-one stairs to reach the office.

There's big security on the door, always was. But now too, another air-lock, bullet-proof, bomb-proof, maybe.

Wilson sat behind his desk. He looked the same as ever, too.

"Good to see you, Jack, despite the circumstance."

"Yeah, likewise."

I placed the second, larger, disc by his hand, and a robo-service whipped out the wall and squirreled it away.

"How is it outside?"

I told him.

Wilson looked grim. "Since we got closed down, we've gotten a bit of a

delay in here finding things out. That wasn't so at the start. Except we get all the news—unexpurgated—for the other three cities involved—”

He consulted his lappo-file as if to avoid my look when I said, dumb as the cabby, “Three?”

“Ah, you hadn't heard. Yeah, three now.” He showed me the screen. “Here is the latest. Eastern seaboard. One hundred and eighty-seven confirmed, ninety pending. At this stage, that's enough. They'll be shutting down by this evening. Shut-down gets faster, has to. They were over a month with us, you can imagine the pink tape.”

“Another city under a tome.”

He looked at me. A cold-eyed bastard, Wilson, steel and mirror.

“What else, Jack, do we got?”

The *tomes*, it's jargon. Officially they are known as what they are, *domes*. Hygienic, air-proof, waterproof. Not another rainy day, some of them joked, when the first was lowered and cemented into place. Pure self-cleaning, germ-erasing air. And not a chance of a rogue airplane breaking through. Never a cloud without a silver . . .

Gane's Journal X7

“Good morning, Miss—uh—” said my regular physician, as I walked into his office.

“Carradene.”

“Carradene? Now that's strange, we already have a Miss Carradene.”

“I am she.”

He smiled. “No you're not.”

I did what I had to around the city. Had gotten through most of it before the deadline. Like Ed, and others, had told me, by then I began to see them coming out of their bolt-holes into the light of deepening afternoon. It reminded me of semi-nocturnal animals leaving their burrows. Dangerous animals, and the rest of the prey-animals then scatter off the veldt. The streets were certainly emptying. The vulnerable ones, whose employers still don't let them off early, club together for a taxi or a hire-bus. There is safety in numbers. Perhaps.

But of course it's less any kind of attack they're afraid of, than just the hell of foreseeing.

Did anyone think it would ever be like this?

Did anyone ever predict it could *happen* like this?

We've watched the movies, the shock-doccus, read—some of us—the history books.

There was an old guy sat on the sidewalk outside Ed's apartment block, drinking a can of Colby's. He looked up and shook his dirty grey locks at me and winked a bleary eye. “You an' me both, sir. The weak shall inherit.”

“Sure, pops.”

* * *

Marianna.

I used to have a big thing about her, when Ed and I were in our twenties. But she chose Ed, and a better guy she could not have found, if she had panned the whole state for gold.

And cook . . . God, could Marianna cook.

Yes, a cliché. But you see, she *liked* to cook. With her, it was performance art, it was art. And it even lasted. You never forgot. I have dated events sometimes from the food she made—the day of the Lobster with Oranges, the hour of the Cinnamon Cookie—

Ed used to tell me, these past thirty years, you kept your weight down, boy, because you never lived with anyone could cook like Marianna.

In fact, the past half year, I'd had something else to help me there. Better late than never.

She, though, never altered. Well, okay. She was older, around fifty-nine now I guessed, I'd never really known her age. Her hair had greyed but she blonded it at the salon. Her figure was lush but not out of shape. So, a few lines in the rose-petal of her face.

Sure. I still loved her. But now, in the way you love the best of your past. She had never been mine, and I was glad. I wouldn't have made her happy, and Ed—he had.

We had a drink on the balcony. It looked out along Walnut towards Bate Street, and over there now you could see the bars flashing like fallen suns in the black city hollows of the dark. Loud music rumbled and pulsed. But it was faint enough back here.

We talked about nothing, the old times, about when we'd gone to Greece, and to Italy, Venice, the lights on the Grand Canal, that kind of stuff. Pretending that this was just one more lit up night, meant for the young and beautiful, which once (had we?) we had been too.

Then she brought the cake.

It was like a birthday.

She made me cut the first slice.

It was like I remembered. No one cooks like that. It's taxable. And Ed, fat happy Ed, best buddy—how had he *kept* himself to *just* two hundred and thirty pounds?

Over on the dresser was an enhanced photo of Marianna's dad, who died fifteen days ago. He had been eighty-six. At eighty-six, perhaps not so bad. But no, it had been. Bad.

But they'd be all right. They'd be fine. You could see it shine out of them, I thought, the way that other thing *burns* from the rest.

"What's wrong, honey?"

Marianna touched Ed's arm.

I hadn't noticed a thing, caught up in my inner dream, one eye still on the horizon of jangle-tangle disco lights.

"Nothing—just . . . I guess a bit of nut stuck in a tooth—"

"Ed. I *never* put in any nuts. I know your teeth—you can break a molar on cold butter!"

"Okay, honey, no. I know you wouldn't. Just something—hey, excuse me, folks. I'll go seek the kindness of the dental floss."

Laughing he went, and laughing we let him go.

"Are you all right, Jack?" she said then to me, so tenderly.

"Sure, Marianna. Only I'm sorry I can't get you both out of here."

"When we just repainted the apartment? It's fine, Jack. Ed wouldn't go anyhow. He takes the job seriously. And he's so needed now. Isn't he?"

"You look wonderful," I said. "You look—"

"I look *old*," she said playfully. "And isn't that *exactly* as it should be at my age?"

Ed came back, wandering back smiling on to the balcony, his glass of wine still in his hand.

"Better, sweetheart?" she asked.

"Yeah, it was nothing. Only a bit of—well, honey, you *said* you didn't use any nuts."

Marianna decided there must have been nuts in the flour which no label had revealed. She blamed the tome shut-down, and said she'd have a word at the store.

Only about midnight, as he saw me down in the elevator to the cab I'd ordered via the Corp, did I ask him. "What was wrong in your mouth?"

"Guess it's nothing, feller."

"And?"

"Old tooth, right the way back, broken in a ball game and extracted, I was about fourteen. Seems to be . . ." he paused. He said, as the elevator doors undid, "growing back."

Outside, the cab and cab driver, and his side-rider in the passenger seat with his .22 special, catch off all through the ride. Beyond the windows the lightning of the lights, and the young lions out all over the streets, spilled like a river of gold and ice and ebony and diamond. Running, screaming, laughing, dancing, performing acrobatics, crying.

A flood of glamour. Going crazy. But the young and the beautiful have always done that.

At the hotel the security netted me in and slammed shut the thick bullet-proof glass of the doors. The cab drove off fast as fire through oil. But next minute there was a paramedic vehicle coming on a siren shriek, and soon the doors undid again to let the medics through. The hotel receptionist had long, pale hair, and when the trolley carried her out to the vehicle, this hair trailed along the floor. Someone whispered, "I didn't know—she doesn't look so different—Christ, we're in trouble—" She was very beautiful. And her eyes, crystal clear, green as glass, stared at me as they wheeled her by. "Wanna kiss me, gramps?" she murmured. Then smiled, "I guess you'd rather kiss the cunt of hell."

Gane's Journal X7

"Really, Miss Carradene. This is foolish, isn't it. Perhaps you are a friend, even a relative of the Miss Carradene who is on our books here. I can see a slight resemblance, I admit, in the PI image. But I'm afraid I can't treat you. I'm *not* your registered physician."

"They checked my PI at the desk."

"Yes, yes."

"So how did I get through if I'm not who I say?" "I really don't know, Miss Carradene, but identity theft isn't unknown. Perhaps I should call the police."

I got up then and walked out of his office.

He'd always been fairly stupid, making a fuss and frightening me over my weight, when I couldn't do another thing about it. And although there was the big poster out in front, he apparently said all that was nonsense—I'd heard the assistant talking on her CP about this, she thought I couldn't hear. Well, a month before I wouldn't have.

Going back home, I bought myself another dress a couple more sizes smaller. I'd gotten a new haircut too. No need to do much with my hair now though. This deep red color. Thick silk.

I saw more of the posters. They were here and there. Anything unusual, consult your health center.

But it was nothing to do with me, whatever that was. I'd only gone to him because I wanted a contraception shot. I had a date tonight. A really good one. (I'd been peri-meno for a while, but I didn't take risks.) I could buy the shot anyhow, at Fast-Hosp. I'd just do that.

I was just happy. Finally it was all paying off, the boring grueling exercise, the strict starvation diet, the prayers and lit candles. Even that whole-body alternative vitamin.

I noticed some big tracks running by on the overhead, the kind of rail-vehicle they use for building work. Some copters too, off to the west and east, buzzing around on the sky's edge like big black flies.

But you live in the city, things go on. Don't they.

It was the start of the foundation for the dome—the tome. But I didn't know, and there was still another month before anyone properly did.

Alexander the Great wanted to conquer the world, so did Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler. A few others, too, come to that, who didn't make it quite so far, or earn so much media attention.

You get your troops and you march. And you blast and burn and you kill. And then each bit of land, a village, a city, a country, a continent, belongs to you. But you've made a mess of it, getting there. A real mess. In the end all you can really say you are is a king of the dead.

The next day I saw to most of the remaining business. A couple of the cab drivers—I made certain I always used a different one—congratulated me. "How old are you? Fifties, I guess. No spring in your step. Like me. Look, see these brown spots on my hands. I count 'em every morning. All present and correct, yessir!"

And then the last one, that afternoon, a young attractive guy who said, " 'S'okay, mister. I ain't no problem. Look, here's my license. I'm twenty-nine years and four months legit, see? And look, see—broken tooth."

Something made me say—it had been one helluva day—"You could have broken that this morning. Still be like that, maybe."

And he swore at me. "You wan' my fuckin' wheels or ya don't."

"I want them. Pardon my big mouth."

"Yeah," he said, letting me in. "Yeah. Ya wanna watch that big mouth of yours."

"Sure. You're absolutely right."

"My dad," he said. That was all. *My dad*. Another father.

Then, twenty miles on: "He was only forty-seven. Young enough. And fit as they go. Fitter'n me driving this tin can shit around and around. Used to play ball, my dad, for the Ruby League. Ya think—"

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," he said. "Just watch your mouth."

It isn't better for the fit ones anyway. I could have told him, but I was watching my mouth, as I damn well should have. As I had with Rosso Centi at the Overmile Building.

I'd seen the moment we met. Anyone would.

And he saw me see, by now practiced.

"What do you think, Jack?"

"You tell me," I said. "If you want."

"I've joined the army," he said, as we pulled out chairs and sat, with the double-screen lappo-lux between us.

"Army. . . ?"

"The conquering horde, Jack. What else. I'm enlisted."

Centi was sixty-seven, and he'd kept his hair, something Ed but not I had always envied. Only now that hair was a deep rich molasses brown. Dark eyes clear as a child's.

A couple of years ago, I'd have thought he'd been off for a plasti-job. But he hadn't, of course.

We completed the task with the screens, exchanged discs.

A robo brought us coffee.

"I've always been healthy, stayed fit," he said, when we shook hands.

"So I won't have long. See you next time, Jack. Wherever, if ever. Always nice to work with you."

Gane's Journal X7

That date was even hotter than I'd dreamed. Best first date I ever had.

Strange to say—or maybe not—I'd been attracted to a guy about my own age, well, a few years younger, fifty-two, fifty-three. And he, well, he'd taken to me all right.

You get used to what you see in a mirror.

I'd gotten used to seeing this fat ugly thing that wasn't ever me. And somewhere in the deepest core of the *real* me, gotten used to always knowing I would one day *change*. Cinderella goes to the ball, doesn't she? Snow White and Beauty get kissed *back* out of living death? And that girl in the mouldy catskin, she gets to throw it off.

My nose, my blubber lips—they had been only fat, obviously. They'd melted back to what they always must have been, there under the disguise of ugly. A *slim* nose, a full but well-shaped mouth, all ready for a prince to kiss.

And two big blue-as-blue eyes.

And redhaired, as if from the finest henna I'd never ever tried, silk hair

falling grass-thick over my shoulders, to my new firm full breasts, and just touching my reinvented slender waist and those lovely dancer's hips. Legs—I had legs now, not chopped-off tree trunks. Ankles you can circle each with one strong hand.

Pretty. I'm so pretty.

He and I had dinner and went to a hotel. I'd never had so much sex in all my life. He was fit enough, a great lover, even for a guy younger than he was. Or maybe it was already kicking in.

I didn't need, had I known, the contraceptive shot. Shame, really, I could have saved the money. But then, for what.

He said, "I'm old enough to be your . . . uncle." Amused at the old line.

"Don't be worried," I said, "I'm—"

"Don't tell me now. God. Twenty-four?"

And, delirious from the wine and the love-making, and the glimpses I caught of myself in the mirrors, I thought, no, I *won't* tell you.

Because I was sixty-one. Hormonal-delayed menopause. Ugly.

But that had been the me before I changed.

After our first date there were several others. He had dough and we went to Flores Beach. And he said, "You've woken me up, Ganey. I never felt so good. I feel *young*. And look, are you proud of me? I've lost three inches off my waist."

Later, when the dome went up, he'd stopped calling me. They all did, all the five men I'd gone with by then. The youngest one, he was about thirty—he stopped first. I don't know now if he knew, or if he—it's worse then. I wish with him I hadn't—but how could I know any of that?

The older ones, maybe I meet them sometimes on the street at night, when we party, and fuck against the walls in the neon lights, and throw bottles to try and smash the bullet-proof glass shutters of the bars. They'll know *me*, but maybe I won't know them. Not like they are now.

Who wants to get old?

Who'll buy? Anyone?

None of us?

It's in the smallprint when we're born. When we're struggling through the challenged incapacity of infancy and childhood and the teenage years. It's the monster behind the glittering door.

Eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-five: the staircase top. Then down.

Nobody wants it, but nobody wants to die either. Unless you make them want it. No one.

Ed called me at a quarter to four in the morning, when outside, despite the noise-resistance of the hotel, I could just dimly hear the crash of music and of breaking things, and see, through a nip in the dark blind, a ripple of red light that was a burning car.

"Have to speak soft, Jack. I'm in the downstairs john with the CP. Sorry, sorry to wake you."

"Was awake, Ed." I didn't mention the noises had woken me, the flames. "Working."

"Sure. Sorry, pal."

"What is it? Is it the tooth?"

"Oh boy. If only. It's—it's my frigging *hair*, Jack." He says it on a screaming whisper. "All over my head, growing back. Thought this morning—shaved it. Just tidy up the wisps. But tonight—it itches me. And I can feel it now, like—it's like thick felt, a *nap*, all over my scalp."

"Okay, okay, Ed."

"But I was just normal yesterday. I'd *gained* weight. The weight-winner the doc gave me *showed* it. But tonight I ate, deliberately, I ate like a hog. And I've lost six pounds, Jack."

We stay in silence. A silence rimmed, like the camp in the jungle, by watching unseen sounds and eyes of flame.

"Do you want me to fast-track you into Corp medicare, Ed? Get you a proper check? This may only be—"

"Jack, I can *see* it. My face. It's different. And Marianna—she can see it too, I can tell."

"Is she—"

"She doesn't say a word."

"But *how* is she?"

"Oh—no, she's—I think she's fine, Jack. Only. Only. We." He falters. The longest pause of all. "We had relations yesterday. We do, Jack, y'know. She and I."

"Listen. We both know this fucking shit gets passed by anything. By a sneeze in a crowded room. By a patch of damp from a sweaty palm on a handrail. A sobbed out *tear*. Even contact with a piece of clothing like a dry clean scarf. You pick it up—"

"I *know*. I know. I just—"

"I know, Ed. It's okay."

"Christ, it isn't. I put the light on in here, Jackie, and I can see my face. Even in four more hours it's firming up. It's smoothing off. I always have to stop on the twenty-fifth stair at work, just a quick breath. Only today . . . I didn't have to stop."

"Let me help. What can I do?"

"How do I know?"

"Come into the medicare. Wilson's outfit is able—"

"It's all right." He sounds deadly calm now. "I've booked a session with the doc, did it earlier . . . thought he might reassure me. Tomorrow at five PM. Only appointment he has left. Decent guy. He's just thirty. The other feller—the one Mari and I knew. The arthritis in his knee went, scan showed the bone had straightened, gone back into shape. That was all. He had to leave the practice. Last I heard he killed himself, ran his car into the West Bridge."

Tome.

It comes from two words, one of which obviously is *dome*. Each dome is city-wide, and takes in the suburbs too. They bulldoze out a kind of no man's land at the perimeter. Sure, some people lose their homes, the freeway's interrupted. They rehouse you, inside. And make new tunnels for the rail service. Airlocks, landing strips. But it's surprising how fast they can do it. When they have to.

Condition red.

But why the “t” and not the “d”?

You guessed, possibly. T is for Tomb. A tomb-dome, a *tome*.

Because once it starts it isn't going to stop. One case, two cases, that is the same as one thousand, two million. And rising. Soon to be billions. Like it was, and is, in those other two—*three* now—places.

So all you can do is wall it in, cover it over, put on the lid. Rev up the support services inside and the surveillance. Then monitor, and *care*. But care from a distance.

And censor the TV channels, to protect that Sensitive Viewer, whoever the fuck that can be.

Tome.

Entomed.

I was sitting in the waiting area, nicely air-conditioned and noise-proofed, with not unpleasant Muzak playing to keep us all serene, when the redhead walked in.

Long legs, perfect figure, hair swinging to the kind of waist you used to see only in old technicolor movies. Only now, here and there, you see it quite a lot, especially once the afternoon advances.

A hush falls. A few of them put on their little portable masks. But most of them know the masks aren't a lot of use. It will get in at any crack, and it probably did already.

And anyway, maybe this is just one of those rare beings, a naturally stunningly physically beautiful human.

She speaks to the reception assistants, gives them her card. They process that.

The processing is auto, and there is a partition between the staff here and all the patients, exactly as there is now in there, where Ed is, talking to the doctor.

Even so, the assistants kind of huddle away.

She walks back from the desk and hesitates, looking for a seat that's far off from everyone.

What will it matter, the screens, the separation? Under the tome, with its ever-clean recycling air, the germs of all of us move in a never-ending dance, threading and re-threading, so every breath any of us inhales, *exhales*, is laced with minute unseeable beads of somber potential.

There was outcry when the first tome went up, over and on.

But, like the cement and bomb-proof glass, it settled.

Perhaps this thing can be contained? Surely better to sacrifice X number trillion lives, and so save the greater number, whatever in the end that will be? And there is always, with these events, a percent of natural immunity, too. Not everyone, not all—

“Why don't you sit here?”

She glances at me. Oh, I must be already infected, even if I don't look it, not a smidge. And I'm parked well away from the rest.

“Thanks.”

She sits on the seat next to mine.

After a moment she says, “I shouldn't have come here.”

"Maybe not."

"Don't know if he'll even see me. My own physician kept refusing to believe I *was* me. I mean, I'm over sixty. He thought I was insane, or I'd stolen my identity. And then when he changed too—the practice shut."

"Yes."

She crosses her legs. Oh, those legs.

She's lovely. She's dead.

"I just want to ask them something. I—sort of want to know—how long I've got."

I said, "They can't always tell. Some have had it six months, or a year. No longer than a year, at least not so far that anyone knows. Others . . . It can be sooner."

"Somebody said the fitter you are the quicker . . ."

"It can do that. If you're fine to start with it has less to work on."

"Like—somebody young. Good-looking. I was obese, or so they said. I looked like shit." She gives a sudden silky laugh.

Nobody, even if that offends them, takes any apparent notice. They're all pretending she isn't here, or that everything is ordinary.

"And, you said, you're sixty."

"Yes," she says.

"That's good. You'll probably go over ten months, a full year. That's the current notion. A friend of mine, his wife's father was eighty-six, partly blind, and very frail. He was going strong for more than eleven months. And he didn't get sick. He died in a fight."

I'm speaking, impartially, of Marianna's father. I had never been shown a recent image, how he'd become after changing. Only the old photo, the view of a tired old man. I hadn't seen him either, in the apartment, six-weeks back, cursing Marianna, this young handsome godlike naked man of thirty-five or six, with his shining hair and mouth full of flawless teeth and dirt. Young enough to be his daughter's son. Before Ed managed to throw the naked god out. Was that how Ed had gotten infected? Very likely.

Just a touch will do it.

I reach over and pat the girl's smooth hand, with its long strong oval nails. "It's okay. Hang in there. They're working on a cure."

And they are.

Only trouble is, they don't know what this thing is.

Looked at under all those microscopes, in all those cunningly lit dark rooms, that tiny golden evanescent spangle, now here, now gone.

Where has it come from? No one knows. Has it been created willfully, or in error, or has it only spontaneously come to be? No one can tell. Brought in or simply dropped from space, or risen up through millennia from the depths of the guts of the world, it bears no relation to anything known, or even to the premise of the unknown *possible*.

A door comes open up the long room.

Out steps Ed Kovalchy, smiling and quiet. The thick new cap of blond hair sheens on his head. It might not be anything. He might only be white already and regularly shave his scalp.

He walks briskly to me, sees the girl, and looks at her with his sad eyes.

"My name's Gane," she says, "that's Gainor Carradene. Nice to meet you." And she gets up after all and goes out.

And Ed says to me, quiet under the Muzak, "Let's find a bar."

So we go find a bar, although by now it's almost six PM, and on the streets the carnivores are gathering in their glowing pelts of murder.

All my life I read books, lots of them. Off a screen, between paper or cloth or leather covers. Always have. My weakness. My eyesight's always been good too, I don't even need spectacles now, in my fifty-sixth year.

So I have, in the course of reading, read about the great disasters, the wars and sieges, the plagues, when mankind, trapped in the pit of a single village or city or country or continent, roiled and rioted, went mad in an orgy of lust and venery, the last supper of hate, before the blackest death of all swept in to claim them.

And that's what happens now.

Once they know they have it, they leave the rules behind. They take off their clothes and their souls and hang them on a hook, and reach deep into the fire of life for one last several times.

Ed didn't care now. He had joined the legion. He sat and drank whiskey, all one bottle, and then he had some more.

He hadn't called Marianna. What could he say?

She knows. She knows.

The young think they won't get this, I mean the truly young ones, the ones who really not only look, but *are* eighteen, twenty, thirty. But they do get it. It just kills them much quicker. Snuffs them out between its amorphous golden fingers. And the children. Quicker still. They just drop. There's not much it can do there, only kill. Maybe it's kinder, then, the fast erasing, like a dab of white-out on a printed page . . .

It kills them all. It kills anything human, or one must presume *almost* anything, because there will be the cases of natural immunity, even if thus far none have shown up.

Four cities down now, as of eight AM today.

I heard that from Wilson over the scram CP not an hour ago. Over to the west, the latest conquest. Oh, and the first cases showing up in Europe too. One suspect (for one read one thousand) in the far East.

It has a name.

Everything has to have one, doesn't it.

"You're not drinking, Jack," Ed said, slurring a little. "G'on. Let's drink to long life." In the middle of the bar dance floor, where the neons are starting to flash orange and blue and white, a whirling girl with bare breasts that put the goddess of love to shame arcs slowly over and falls to the ground.

None of the others take any notice, except they dance around her for a while. But some minutes after, I see they just dance over her, trampling her into the earth. The floor's wet there, white-wet, blue-wet, orange.

Symbiosis—Is an interaction between two differing organisms which come to live in physical association. This relationship is usually of advantage to both, i.e. as with Jentle's coral, whose bright color and lumines-

cence, so attracting to prey, spring from the action of the minute boring worm *Isrulum*. However, as in this particular partnership, if other conditions become unsuitable, the worm will abandon the host it has colonized, at which both color and light are lost, and hollowed out and starved, the coral dies. From the Greek word *Symbios*—a companion.

Parasite—Is an organism existing in or on another and living at the expense of said other. A parasite will normally colonize and destroy the host. From the Latin *Parasitus* via the Greek *Parasitos*—one who eats at another's table.

Virus—Is a submicroscopic infective agent (consisting of etc.) able to multiply only within the living walls of a host. From the Latin *Virus*—a poison.

Nobody even tries that hard now to stay clear, as I saw for myself first in the airport. The healthy ones are getting blasé, many of them. What can you do? The air is full of it, was so even before the tome. Every breath you take.

Symparasic Virus.

That is the name. SPV for short. Used in code once before everyone started to have to know.

The initial cases went completely overlooked for months, longer, because of the peculiar action, the *method* the virus employs.

Before it kills, it makes beautiful. It corrects any imperfections, restores movement and function to impaired limbs, anatomy, organs, dispenses with aging, reversing time to a level legitimately in balance with existing years—twenties for fifties and early sixties, say, thirties for the ones over eighty. It banishes infirmity. Whatever is even cosmetically wrong it expunges and makes fine. Whatever is right it improves to the highest degree endurable. The infected, and, by then, dying victims, become glorious, and remain so until the last three to seven hours of their lives.

Why? It's obvious, isn't it. To make them enticing.

SPV likes to colonize. To conquer. That is its sole blind and total ambition. And so each host grows enticing in order to lure further prey—to which the virus can then pass.

That works more or less one hundred hundred percent.

Because we love beautiful things, most of us. We love to look at them and hold them, and kiss them and fuck them, and, at the worst, maybe we just pick up the clean scarf they dropped unknowing on the sidewalk, and sleep with it under the pillow . . .

It doesn't think, Symparasic. Doesn't need to. No more than the snowball rolling downhill that becomes an avalanche.

But I mentioned the last hours.

A comparatively swift death compared to the kind of stuff the human race has routinely suffered. But not enviable.

Deliquescence. That word will do, I guess. That's enough. Enough for all the world, and for Ed, who was my friend. And Marianna maybe. And that little girl with her auburn-burning hair. Enough.

* * *

I got him home across the city. The cab driver was one of the night guys from the Corp. He too had his shotgun riding alongside in the passenger seat.

Marianna met me, calm and unruffled as she wouldn't ever have been if I'd just dragged her partner in from one of our youthful drunks of thirty years before.

Once she'd put him to bed, she said to me, "I guess he won't feel bad tomorrow—no hangover. Do I have that right?"

"No. He'll be fine."

"That's how it works, this—*thing*."

"SPV. Yes, how it works. Anything goes wrong like that, it puts it right. Alcohol—even tainted food—toxins. Neutralizes them in a few hours."

We stood in the living room. Books on the walls, the music and TV center, good colors, home comforts.

"If there's anything I can do, Marianna. Someone'll be out and see him tomorrow around noon. Henry, I think."

"Okay," she said.

"I have to go back to—well, where I have to go. But I can be here again soon as I can if there is anything—"

"No, Jack," she said firmly. "Don't come again. Just—let us go now. We all just have to let go, don't we. It's all right, Jack." She smiled at me. "It's not *if*, after all, is it. Only *when*. The readiness," she added, with a sudden arch lift of her eyebrows, "is all."

"Sure. But—"

"Oh, Jack. Do you really think I had my hair bleached this month?"

I stared at her.

She said, "Do you know, I'm such a fool, when I first dropped four pounds I was pleased, thought it was the diet."

"Christ. Not you."

"Not me? *Why* not me? Why not *Ed*? It's all of us. Or—most of us. I said, didn't I, or Shakespeare did, the guy I quoted back there."

"Yes." I didn't know, even then, if I believed her, or would let myself. Don't now.

She came and kissed me, gentle, on the mouth. "I know I can't hurt you."

"No, you can't. Not that way."

"Dear Jack. Trust me for this. Ed and I won't fetch up—like those others. Maybe we can even enjoy ourselves a little before—we have to end it. But that's what we'll do. Quietly, here. I know there are no shots, no cure. But there are tablets to make it decent, aren't there, so we can choose. Ed and I discussed it, weeks ago. Of course we did. That's what we'll do."

"Speak to Henry tomorrow. The tablets. He'll see to it you get the best."

"Yes, we will. Thank you, Jack. Good bye, Jack. I'll tell Ed so-long for you. Nice—lovely, lovely, Jack, to know you."

When I went down, the cab was waiting by the sidewalk, and so was the girl with red hair, Gainor Gane Carradene.

"She's stable," said the Corp guy. "I checked her out. She's about a nine-

monther and holding fine. Brain action's okay. Not pissed and not a crazy. What d'you want I do?"

"I'll speak to her."

"I'm right over here."

She and I walked up the block in the cindery dark between the clear white shine of two street lamps.

Over there, by now, the discos bellowed. Strobes like Northern Lights in the lower sky. Might have been another planet.

"Thanks for what you told me before," she said. "About the time I have left. You know that kind of stuff, I can see."

"How did you find me?"

"Followed you. You and the other guy."

"Why was that?"

"I don't know." She raised her beautiful face to look at one single brilliant star high in the aerial corridor between the buildings. "No, I do know. I wondered how you're not afraid of this—of what I've gotten inside me. Because you're not sick, are you—you don't have it?"

"I don't have Symparasic."

"So why aren't you afraid? Have they *found* something that can stop it?"

"I'm sorry. I told you, not yet."

"If you aren't cured and you aren't sick—then are you immune?"

"Yes, Gane," I said. "In a way."

"So how?"

Her face turned to me now, her eyes—not sad or angry, not stupid or scared, or anything at all. Empty, her eyes. Waiting to be filled, only I couldn't fill them. Only the star that was somehow caught in both of them, only the star could do that.

"I have cancer, Gane. It's terminal. Another conquering colonizer, and too major an outfit for even SPV to fight it and win. They say TB is the same in its advanced stages, and one or two other of the big gun parasites. It tries, SPV, can't get a hold. And no, one won't cancel out the other. I'm on the same highway, Gane. We all are. We all always were."

Aboard the flight, once we were clear of the locks and covered take-off, out in the liquid night, the human girl came by with snacks and drinks. She looks like a movie star, she has it too. But no one minds. This is a Corp flight, and we all have it here, or something else that won't let it in. And we all know where we're headed and what to do about it. Readiness. Yes.

So it doesn't matter either when she sees what I'm reading, this wonderful novel, one of the best of the twentieth century. The title doesn't even faze her when she asks, and bends to look. "I read that in high school," she tells me, and passes on. And I look out the window and watch the city in the tome, one now among seven, soon one among a countless multitude, falling away behind me into the night. Then I go back into the book, which has less to do with any of this than any other thing I can think of. And its name? Everything has to have one. *The Beautiful and Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. ○

UNLIKELY

Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh has sold stories to *Interzone*, *Postscripts*, *Chizine*, *Strange Horizons*, and other venues. He's been a finalist for both the British Science Fiction Association and the British Fantasy Society awards for best short story of 2005. By day, Will is a psychology professor in the southeastern United States. His wry tale about what life might be like if we really did know how it worked is his first for *Asimov's*.

She scanned the diner in that way people do when they're looking for someone based only on a vague description. In this case Samuel knew that the vague description was a tall guy in his late fifties, wearing a jeans jacket. Samuel raised a hand. She waved and headed toward his booth.

She was skinny, long reddish hair streaked with white. No breasts to speak of, but sexy nonetheless. Not that this was a date.

"Samuel, hello." She slid into the seat across from him. They shook hands over the table.

"Hello Tuesday, nice to finally meet you."

There was an awkward silence. What did you say in this sort of situation? Had anyone ever been in this sort of a situation?

A waitress wearing a baseball cap, her ponytail poking through the space in the back, saved the day by taking their order, giving Samuel time to think of something to say.

"Can you believe this? The whole thing is absolutely staggering nonsense."

"You think so?" Tuesday said. She canted her head and shrugged. "I don't know. Don't you believe in the numinous?"

Samuel smiled wanly. "No. I don't believe in the numinous." The numinous? Who the hell used the word numinous?

"Hmm. I do. I'd like to be part of something numinous." She twisted sideways in the booth, drew one foot onto the red faux leather, and retied the shoelace of her black Keds hightop. She tied enthusiastically; the knot she produced had about six bows. She swapped feet and started working on the other lace.

"Most people don't realize how important well-tied shoelaces are," she said. "Shoes ground you—if they're too loose or too tight, or if one is tighter than the other, you're out of balance, and you can't walk true."

"But you're not walking," Samuel pointed out.

"True. But I will be later."

"Ah." Samuel was starting to wonder if it had been a good idea to agree to this. She was one of those new age types. Next she'd be suggesting they visualize world peace, or try to channel a dead high priestess of Lemuria.

"The mayor seems to believe there's something to this," Tuesday said.

"He's desperate. Clutching at straws."

"So why did you agree to meet?" Tuesday asked, her Keds back on the black and white tile floor.

Samuel paused while the waitress plunked down two glasses, followed by big metal milkshake tumblers. His strawberry milkshake looked as thick as cement. Damn, did he love this place.

"Professor Berry said there was an easy way to prove him wrong: meet with you on and off for a week. If the city's accident rate didn't go down when we were together, and back up when we were apart, he'd return his consulting fee to the city." The shake made a satisfying plopping sound as he poured it into the glass. "His ideas are wacked. 'Data mining for non-intuitive connections'? You can smell the bullshit from three pastures away."

"You know what I wanted to ask him? How did he know when particular people were in the vicinity of each other?"

"He monitored license plates. There were surveillance cameras mounted to record the comings and goings of every single vehicle, twenty-four hours a day, for eight months."

Tuesday was digging through her bowl of sweet-potato fries, tossing one after another into a pile on the edge of her plate. Her arm was dusted with freckles.

"What are you doing?" Samuel asked.

"I'm not that hungry, so I'm only going to eat the most attractive ones."

A flurry of movement out of the window caught Samuel's attention. A pack of bicyclers wobbled by on Whitaker Street. All were old men—none were a day under seventy, and some looked to be well into their nineties, their shriveled parchment faces utterly out of place under the smooth bubble helmets.

"Why us?" Tuesday asked. "Why do you think the accident rate goes down when we're in the vicinity of each other?"

"It doesn't. It's bullshit."

"But what if it turns out it does?"

Typically Samuel liked to stay through the credits, to get the full moviegoing experience, but Tuesday stood as soon as the lights went up, and Samuel deferred.

"So, what'd you think?" Tuesday asked.

"I didn't expect to like it as much as I did," Samuel said. "It was slow, and I usually get impatient with slow films." Someone had dropped a bucket of popcorn in the aisle; it crunched underfoot as they headed for the

exit. "I'm wary of movies that are described as 'sweeping sagas,' and if anyone in a film is wearing a powdered wig, I avoid the film like the plague."

Tuesday threw back her head and laughed, loud enough that others glanced at her. Samuel wished he could laugh like that. When was the last time he'd laughed really hard, totally out of control?

"So, tell me more about yourself," Tuesday said as they emerged onto the sidewalk, under a streetlight painting a circle in the darkness. "I know you're a retired philosophy professor, and you live in a condo in Wilmington Park."

Samuel shrugged. "Let's see. I like to paint, I have an old dog named Riley, and every Christmas I work as a Santa in Macy's."

"You do not."

"You're right, I don't."

"So, you never married?" Tuesday asked.

"In other words, what's wrong with me?"

"I didn't mean it as a criticism. It was just a question."

"Sorry. I get a little defensive about it. It's like your entire life was a failure if you don't get married and have kids. I don't want kids. Women say men who don't want kids are immature, not because they aren't able to have a healthy relationship, but because they don't want what women want."

"Mmm. You are a little defensive on that topic. Let's move on. What were your first words?"

"You mean, when I was an infant? I have no idea."

"That's a shame. Maybe your sister knows? It's important to know." They'd reached her car. Samuel tensed, feeling the awkwardness of being in a date moment with this woman he wasn't dating. He stuffed his hands in the tight front pockets of his jeans. "See you Tuesday."

She laughed, and he realized the dual meaning of that phrase and chuckled. He tried to let go and laugh hard, but it just didn't come.

The square was strangely deserted, save for an old man walking a Pomeranian. When Samuel was younger, he rarely noticed the old people. Now it was the young people who were more likely to escape his notice. He loved the squares scattered throughout downtown—how they broke up the landscape, a perfect melding of urban and green, movement and stillness. A horse-drawn tour buggy circled the square, filled with tourists clutching maps, the clapping of the horse harmonizing with the low hum of the engines of cars creeping along, caught behind the buggy. It was all perfect. He emptied, and the city filled him.

"Nice day." Dr. Berry said behind him. Samuel turned and smiled.

"Certainly is. Have a seat." Berry settled on the other side of the green park bench.

"Well?" Samuel said.

"You believe in numbers, right? Here are your numbers." Dr. Berry spread a data printout across the bench, facing Samuel. "The means are composites of vehicular accidents and emergency-room visits involving miscellaneous accidents—lawn mowers, steak knives, skateboards and so on—from noon to five PM daily." He ran his finger down the column. "This

is Monday, when you and Tuesday had lunch. Here's a Tuesday, when you didn't meet with her . . ."

He went through the entire week. The pattern was hard to miss. In fact, the pattern was nearly perfect.

"This can't be," Samuel said. The muscle in his cheek twitched. "No. Bullshit."

Berry held his hands out, palms up, and shrugged. "Go confirm the numbers yourself! Call the hospitals, call the police department. We collected the data blind, meaning the person who compiled the numbers didn't know when you and Tuesday—"

"Thanks, I know what a blind experiment is." Samuel's heart was racing so hard his chest hurt. He wanted to get off the bench, but he didn't trust his legs. "How do you explain this?" He stared at an errant brick, kicked from the sidewalk, not wanting to look at the printout any more.

Berry shook his head. "I don't. I'm a statistician; I compile huge data sets and find connections that no one else has found because no one else has bothered to look."

"But this connection is nonsensical. How can Tuesday and I going to a movie possibly affect whether two cars collide thirty blocks away?"

"The connection is unlikely, yes. But just because we don't understand how things connect doesn't mean they don't. That the moon and tides move together seemed damned miraculous before Newton."

The waitress with the baseball cap, the same one as last time, gave him a big, sloppy, rib-straining hug as he stepped through the door.

"We're honored to have you here," she said into his shoulder.

Samuel looked over at Tuesday, at a total loss for what was going on. Her shoulders were bobbing with laughter.

"She hugged me too," Tuesday said when Samuel finally made it to their table. "We've been outed." She slid a folded *Savannah Morning News* across the speckled Formica table:

The Saints of Safety: A New and Controversial Program to Prevent Accidents.

"Oh, Christ," Samuel said. His phone rang. He pulled it from the pocket of his flannel shirt.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" It was his sister Penny.

"Because it's stupid!" he said.

"Are you with her now?"

Samuel sighed. "Yes. Look, I have to go, I'm being rude." Tuesday waved the comment away, shaking her head. She opened the newspaper.

"Just one more thing," Penny said. "What's she like? Is she pretty?"

"Bye, Penny."

"Because you know what this means, don't you? The two of you were meant to be together."

Samuel hung up.

The parking meter was in dire need of a gunmetal grey paint job, its pole skirted in remnants of duct tape left over from lost kitten signs.

Samuel sat parked on Liberty, under the outstretched arms of live

oaks, watching traffic lights flip from red to green, red to green amid the Spanish moss. His car reeked of rotting bananas and moldy apple pie. He'd forgotten to toss his trash into the dumpster on the way out of his condo complex; it was festering in the back seat.

Hissing bursts across the street drew Samuel's attention. A block down, a guy wearing a safety mask was spray painting a red fire engine green.

He spotted Tuesday passing the engine, her vaguely pigeon-toed gait unmistakable. He got out of his car and waved to her.

"Feel like going for a walk?" she said as she crossed the street, gesturing toward Forsyth Park.

"Sure."

They wandered down Abercorn Street, past stately old row houses. Most had steel black bars on the lower windows, tempered with ornate spirals, or crafted to look like branches, to make them not look like what they were: fortification. After a dazzling decade-long revival, the city seemed to be sinking back into decline.

The aroma of onions and peppers wafted from Queenie's.

"Mmm, smell that?" Tuesday asked.

"Nice," Samuel said.

"Do you like to cook?"

"No. I've been cooking my own meals most of my life, and still, opening the refrigerator is always a humbling and confusing experience, and I guess it always will be. My meals are mostly failures, eaten quickly, primarily to dispose of the evidence."

"Sometimes you talk like you're a character in a Carl Hiaasen novel, did you know that?"

"No. Did you know sometimes you talk like a character in a Shirley MacLaine autobiography?"

Tuesday laughed and gave his shoulder a good shove.

"Then you remember Shirley MacLaine's new-age tell-alls? I figured I'd get a blank stare." They passed the Turning Leaf bookstore, tucked a few steps below street level, and Samuel peered in as they passed, admiring the ancient brick walls lined with books. He saw that Tuesday looked in as well. "One of the bad things about aging is that everyone thinks what you like is hokey. My record collection is a never-ending source of amusement to my nieces and nephews."

"Record?"

"Yes, record. I don't care if they're recorded on tapes, CDs, or flying butt monkeys, they're still records."

"Flying butt monkeys?"

They crossed East Henry Street. Two women lounged on a bench at the edge of the park—art students, from their bohemian dress and creative hairstyles. One of them pointed at Samuel and Tuesday.

"That's them!" she said. "The accident people! There was a story in the paper about them. Hey!" She sprang from the bench, the rings in her nose and lower lip swinging. "Wait, can I take a picture with you?"

Tuesday stopped, so Samuel had little choice but to stop as well. The young woman (who looked to Samuel like she'd fallen down a flight of stairs with a tackle box), directed them to stand in front of the big foun-

tain. She squeezed between Samuel and Tuesday, and her friend snapped the picture.

"Now could I get one with just the two of you?" the art student said, backing out of the shot. Samuel gritted his teeth, his hands in his pockets, as her friend snapped the photo. He was becoming half of a talisman; the city rubbed their bellies for luck.

"Let's go," Samuel said. Tuesday nodded, and they continued through the heart of the park.

Two squirrels were digging around in a patch of ivy separating the sidewalk from the lawn.

"Look at how well they get along," Tuesday said. "No fighting, nobody trying to hoard all the nuts. If only humans could be more like other animals."

"All animals are greedy, not just humans."

"Yes, but there's a difference. If a lion kills a gazelle, sure, she'll drive away a hyena or buzzard that tries to horn in on her kill, but only until she starts getting full. Then she doesn't mind if other animals start eating on the other end of the gazelle."

"That's only because she doesn't have a refrigerator."

Tuesday let out an exasperated sigh. "Why do you want to suck all of the joy and beauty out of the world? Do you ever look around, and just marvel at all of this without picking it apart?"

"Absolutely. I'm always looking. I love looking at this city—every brick, every tree, every squirrel. The thing is, it's remarkable enough that things can be so vividly, without having to believe there's some magical undercurrent hidden underneath it all. I don't believe in the numinous; that doesn't mean the world is any less beautiful to me."

Tuesday was smiling at him, her brow knotted. "Now that surprises me. You're not who I thought you were at all. You sound like a Buddhist."

"I'm *not* a Buddhist. I'm not an ist of any kind."

"You stole that line from *Ferris Buehler's Day Off*."

"I did not. All of my material is original."

"Ferris said 'I don't believe in isms of any kind.' You paraphrased, but it's still borderline plagiarism." Tuesday stopped walking. "Hold on. There's something I wanted to give you." She unzipped her purse and dug around, pulled out a little plastic baggie and held it out to Samuel. There was a little tooth inside.

"What is this?" he asked.

"While I was growing up I kept all of my baby teeth. I refused to trade them in for quarters. There's power in them—the power of innocence. Intuitive power. Once in a while I give one to someone important in my life. I'm giving one to you."

"Tuesday, that's really thoughtful of you." He squirmed in the moment, wondering if he had done something to give her the wrong impression.

They walked on, Samuel clutching the baggie, feeling as if sticking it in his pocket would be somehow sacrilegious.

"Look, I hope I haven't misled you in some way," he said. "You . . . I like my life the way it is. I don't want to complicate it."

A young couple passed, their arms wrapped tight around each other's waists. Tuesday was staring at Samuel, her eyes blazing with—something. Hurt? Anger? Maybe both.

"I didn't mean it like that," Tuesday said when the couple had passed. "Look, despite what you seem to think, this whole situation is not some elaborate setup so I can find a boyfriend. I'm not doing this for me. If us spending time together means fewer people will suffer or die, would it kill us to spend a few afternoons a week together, and maybe have fun doing it? Do you find me that intolerable to be around?"

"No! I—"

But Tuesday had already spun around, and was storming off. Evidently it had been a rhetorical question.

She'd already bought her coffee and was sitting by the window, the newspaper spread in front of her.

"Hi," Samuel said.

Tuesday glanced at him. "Hi." She smiled, but the smile didn't reach anywhere near her green eyes.

"I'm sorry. You're right, I was making assumptions that I had no justification for making, and I'm very sorry."

Tuesday squinted up at him, half-blinded by the sunlight pouring through the window, her smile more natural now. "I was going to suggest we sit at separate tables, but I've got to say, that was a decent apology." She kicked out the seat across from her.

Samuel sat, leaned forward. "I keep running this over and over in my mind, looking for an explanation, but I can't find one. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a week. And I never have problems sleeping." Tuesday scanned the paper, as if she were only half-listening. "What do you think is really going on?"

"If you're expecting a nice, neat ending to all of this, I think you're going to be disappointed," she said.

"There has to be an explanation that makes sense."

"Oh, I'm sure there is." She closed the paper. "The question is, is there an explanation that makes sense to *you*? You act like your own personal perspective is some sort of Ultimate Reality"—she gestured grandly, as if the words were floating on a giant billboard above them—"and everyone else is right to the extent that their worldview matches yours."

"You're still angry with me, aren't you?"

"A little," Tuesday said. She sipped her coffee.

A group of seven or eight bicyclists rolled up outside. All of them were old men. They puffed and struggled to pull their bikes up against trees and lamp posts and chain them up.

"I saw those same guys last week, when we were at the Metropolis Diner," Samuel said to Tuesday. They watched as the men entered, talking and laughing, taking shuffling old man steps toward the counter.

"You guys a club?" Tuesday called over to them.

A little man, his spine so curved he had to crane his neck to look at them, shook his head. "Nope, we're city employees. New program, supposed to help with the tourism or something."

Samuel and Tuesday looked at each other. "Tourism, my ass," Tuesday said.

Samuel pulled out his cell phone and dialed Berry.

"We're not your only talisman, are we?"

Berry laughed. "You're very observant. No, we've got nearly a dozen projects running, with more in the pipeline."

"What are the old men on bicycles for?"

"Violent crime. The denser the population of males bicycling, and the higher their average age, the lower the incidence of violent crime."

"Why didn't you mention this?"

"Sam, you're kidding, right? You don't even believe the connections are real! What do you want to know? Remember that influenza virus that went around last January? It only affected people who own red cars. People who use their library cards at least twice a month are less likely to be burglarized than those who don't have library cards. Is that enough? I can go on."

Samuel felt dizzy. He sat. Tuesday gave him a questioning look; he shook his head slowly.

"Sam," Berry said, "this is going to change everything. It's going to change the world. Can you see that?" His voice hitched with excitement.

Samuel could see that, yes. He could probably even get excited about it, if he wasn't part of it. How did the connections work, and why was he involved? He knew this would haunt him for the rest of his life. It was a jigsaw puzzle missing most of its pieces, an itch he would never scratch.

"I need to go," he said to Tuesday. "I have to get out of this city for a day."

"Want some company?"

"Sure."

They walked back to Samuel's car in silence.

"Where should we go?" Samuel asked as they climbed into his Toyota.

"North? Smells like bananas in here," Tuesday said.

"I forgot to dump my trash."

"Charming."

He wasn't in the mood for banter, and he didn't want to talk about Berry's project. He grasped for a topic as he pulled out, onto Drayton Street.

"How long ago did you lose your husband?"

"Six years," Tuesday said. "It was hard, but you move on. He was much older than me—seventeen years—so he wasn't a young man. That helped a little."

"Have you dated anyone since?"

"Mm, a few. Nothing serious." She lifted her sneaker onto the dashboard and retied it. Today they were pink. "So really, why haven't you ever gotten married?"

"I don't know. I really don't. I've never met someone I love who loves me. I guess it's as simple as that."

"I didn't know that could happen. Not for a whole lifetime, anyway," Tuesday said.

"How many people have you met in your entire life that you truly loved, who truly loved you?"

"Two, I guess."

"And what if you hadn't gone into that certain restaurant, hadn't enrolled in that literature class, whatever, where you met those two people? Then you would have met no one. Maybe I didn't happen to make that one left turn that would have led me to her. Though I'm not dead yet. I may still meet her."

"I can't decide whether you're a total cynic, or a hopeless romantic."

"Both. They're not mutually exclusive."

Samuel hung a left onto Victory.

"I don't buy that we meet people by chance alone," Tuesday said. "Sometimes people are meant to meet. There's no way they can avoid it, no matter which way they turn."

"In that case, I would have to believe that fate chose to send me no one."

"Or that fate sent her, but you didn't recognize her."

"True. I'm not very observant. Sometimes I miss my exit when I'm on I-16 and I keep going for miles before I realize it."

"Alzheimer's, probably."

"Thanks."

"*De nada.*"

He stopped at a red light. Two black women crossed the street in front of them. One did a double-take, snagged the other by the sweater and pointed at Samuel and Tuesday. Samuel could hear her shrill tone, but not the actual words. More belly rubbers. The light turned green, and Samuel sped off. Out. He wanted out right now.

Tuesday sighed.

"What," Samuel said.

"Nothing."

"No, really."

"Okay, fine. You refuse to admit that you're attracted to me, out of spite," Tuesday said.

"*What?*" Samuel said. He glanced at her. She kept her eyes facing forward.

"You heard me."

"I don't have anything against you. I like you."

"I know you do. Your spite isn't aimed at me, it's aimed at everyone who wants us to be together because they think we're fated to be together. I hear the talk. It would kill you to prove them right."

He glanced at her again, then back at the road. He didn't know what to say to that. There was some truth to it—he refused to even entertain the possibility of being attracted to Tuesday, because everyone *wanted* him to be attracted to her, and that got his hackles up.

Her sneaker was still propped on the dash, the lace tied in that absurd lotus-flower knot, the toe canted.

"Tuesday, I just don't feel that way about you."

She shrugged. "Okay. Fair enough. If you've honestly opened yourself up to feel something, and you don't, then you don't."

He stopped at another red light. Tuesday sighed, looked out her window.

He hadn't, though. He hadn't let himself even entertain the possibility that the pink sneaker soiling his dashboard was on the foot of a woman he could love.

He let that wall drop a little, that barrier that kept him out of trouble, that kept him from feeling too much attraction toward married women, women who were way too young for him, women others were foisting on him. He didn't immediately get that *wrong* feeling he got when he tried to feel something for a woman he didn't feel anything for. In fact, it felt sort of good to think of Tuesday that way.

Samuel let it go a little further. He imagined sitting in his kitchen, drinking tea with Tuesday on a Sunday morning, her feet propped on the table as she read the paper. Or the two of them in bed on a Friday evening, Tuesday's hair brushing his face.

"You could be right," he said.

"Of course I'm right. Ass." Tuesday said, watching the huge live oaks whiz by. She turned toward him. "But you go right ahead and make your decisions based on spite—"

Samuel leaned over and kissed her. It seemed to surprise him more than it did Tuesday, who kissed him right back, her breath smelling of coffee.

And suddenly it seemed so obvious, that this woman—

Tuesday jerked away, eyes wide. "Look out!"

Samuel slammed on the brakes and yanked the wheel hard to the right, just missing the elderly bicyclist at the back of the pack. The tires squealed; he was thrown forward and then blasted backward as the air bag exploded and a deafening crash ripped the air.

There was a tube running out of Tuesday's nose. Her cheek was so swollen it looked like there was a golf ball buried under the skin.

Her eyes flickered open.

"Hi," he said. "How you doing?"

"Lunatic," she said in a soft, punchless voice.

"I'm sorry."

"S'okay. I wasn't using my gall bladder anyway."

Samuel's guts twisted at the mention of the surgery. "So much for our protective powers. Didn't do much to protect us."

"Well it's not going to work if you drive your car right into a tree, no."

"What was I thinking? I took my eyes off the road completely, like the car was going to drive itself."

Tuesday smiled. "You believe. You tell yourself you don't, but you do. Deep down, you trusted that we'd be safe. A little too much."

Samuel considered. "Maybe you're right, I don't know. If I believe, I believe in the numbers. I don't believe it's a miracle."

"Nobody's asking you to."

Samuel brushed a wisp of hair out of Tuesday's face. "Where Papa go?" he said.

Tuesday laughed, gave him a questioning look.

"My first words. It's written in my baby book."

Tuesday reached out toward the chain around Samuel's neck. "What's this?" She grasped the tooth dangling from it.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Good luck charm," Samuel said. "To keep me safe." ○

Allen M. Steele tells us, "I'm pleased to say that my undergraduate alma mater, New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, is giving me its annual Alumni Achievement Award on the occasion of my twenty-fifth class reunion." In addition, Subterranean Press recently published a beautiful, limited, signed, hardcover edition of his Coyote novella, "The River Horses" (*Asimov's*, October/November 2006). Allen's character Jules makes some ill-advised decisions in the well-named third act of . . .

GALAXY BLUES

PART THREE OF FOUR

THE FOOL'S ERRAND

Allen M. Steele

Synopsis of Part One:

My name is Jules Truffaut, and this is the story of how I redeemed the human race.

It all began when I stowed away aboard the starship Robert E. Lee for its monthly voyage to Coyote, humankind's first interstellar colony. Technically speaking, I was a first-class passenger, having already booked passage to 47 Ursae Majoris. However, as a former ensign in the Union Astronautica of the Western Hemisphere—whose relationship with Coyote is strained at best—it was necessary for me to sneak aboard the ship just before it departed from Earth.

My plan was to travel to Coyote under an assumed identity; once there, I would plead for political asylum. But my scheme backfired when a steward who'd found me became suspicious. Checking the manifest, she discovered that, although I had indeed purchased a ticket, there was no record of me actually boarding the ship. So shortly after the Lee jumped through Earth's starbridge to 47 Ursae Majoris, the chief petty officer placed me under arrest.

On the bridge, I met the Lee's commanding officer, Anastasia Tereshkova. Realizing that I was in serious trouble, I revealed my true identity and informed her that I was seeking amnesty. However, I'd overlooked the fact that one has to actually set foot on foreign soil in order to defect. Since the Lee was still in space, Tereshkova was obliged to take me back to Earth and turn me over to the authorities.

So I took matters into my own hands. On my way to the brig, I escaped from my captors and stole one of the ship's lifeboats. I was trained as a pilot, so I was able to guide the craft to a safe touchdown on Coyote. However, almost as soon as I landed, I was apprehended by the colonial militia.

The soldiers brought me to Liberty, Coyote's largest colony, where I was thrown in jail. I had little doubt that the local magistrates would order my deportation. Before that happened, though, I had two visitors. The first was a mysterious figure who appeared at my cell window. As he stared at me, a door opened in my mind, releasing all my memories. I fell unconscious; when I awoke, the stranger had disappeared.

The second was Morgan Goldstein, the billionaire founder of Janus, Ltd., an interstellar shipping company. Impressed by the way I'd escaped from the Lee, he offered a way out of my predicament. Goldstein was recruiting a crew for an expedition to Rho Coronae Borealis, with the intent of opening trade with its inhabitants, the alien hjadd. If I signed on as shuttle pilot, he would make sure that I wasn't deported. Having little choice, I agreed to work for him.

After arranging for my release, Goldstein took me to a tavern where I met the rest of the crew: the captain, Ted Harker, and his wife and first officer, Emily Collins, both of whom were on the first ship to contact the hjadd; the helmsman, Ali Youssef; and the cargo master, a lovely young woman by the name of Rain Thompson, who was oddly cold toward me. And finally, another passenger besides Goldstein himself: Gordon Ash, whom I recognized as the stranger who'd visited me in jail.

Our ship, the Pride of Cucamonga, hadn't arrived from Earth yet, so we cooled our heels in Liberty for a few days. That gave me time to get interested in Rain. She didn't want anything to do with me, though, and it wasn't until I had breakfast with her that I found out what it was. Somehow, she had learned the reason why I'd been thrown out of the Union Astronautica—I was caught helping my younger brother Jim cheat on his academy exams—and, believing that I'd betrayed him, thought I couldn't be trusted. I was telling her my side of the story when Ted showed up. Our ship had come in, and it was time for us to leave.

When we arrived at the spaceport to board our shuttle, the Loose Lucy, a couple of surprises awaited us. The first was our cargo: two and a half tons of marijuana, which the hjadd apparently regarded as a delicacy. The second was that we had another passenger: Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda—Jas for short, the hjadd Prime Emissary. When I committed a faux pas during my introduction to him, Ash stepped in to quietly correct me. Clearly there was more to him than met the eye.

The Pride of Cucamonga turned out to be an old freighter, but its chief engineer, Doc Schachner, assured me that it was fit to fly. While loading the cargo, Rain and I had an argument which nearly cost me my job; to give me

a chance to cool off, Ted had me take a jug of corn liquor to Ash's quarters. I'd already figured out that Ash was an alcoholic, but while visiting him, I discovered something else: he was capable of reading people's minds.

The next day, the Pride launched from Coyote orbit. While en route to the starbridge—which could only be opened to Rho Coronae Borealis by a coded key Jas carried—the Prime Emissary invited Rain and me to his quarters. While waiting for him/her to let us in, Rain offered an apology for her rude behavior, which I accepted. But she wasn't the only person to surprise me: once we were alone with Jas, heshe asked what we knew about something called the Order of the Eye. I professed ignorance, but after we left his/her cabin, Rain informed me that the Order was a secret cult of telepaths rumored to be funded by Goldstein. This explained why Morgan had invited Ash along: he wanted someone who might be able to tell him what Jas was thinking.

Then Pride made the jump to Hjarr, where we rendezvoused with an enormous space colony, the Talus qua'spah, in orbit above the planet. As circumstances would have it, Rain and I were the first persons to leave the ship. Upon entering what appeared to be an interspecies reception area, we were informed that the two of us needed to undergo decontamination. Fair enough . . . but first, we'd have to comply with a rather embarrassing request.

ELEVEN

The etiquette of decontamination . . . a visit to the library . . . Fah, otherwise known as Haha . . . Ash gets strange(r).

I

Rain's scream was still reverberating from the walls when a *hjadd* materialized.

Heshe appeared so suddenly, my first thought was that heshe was some sort of extraterrestrial djinn, fresh from the lamp and ready to grant me three wishes (the first of which would've been to be any place but here). It took a moment for me to realize that heshe was a hologram, albeit so lifelike that I could've sworn heshe was solid. Heshe regarded us with reptilian solemnity, his/her fin raised to full height from the back of his/her head.

"Pardon me," heshe said, his/her voice nearly the same as Jas's, "but what does the expression 'hell, no' mean?"

I forced a cough to keep from cracking up. "It . . . uh, means that she's . . . ah . . ."

"It means there's no way I'm getting naked." Rain's face was livid. "Not here, not now, and especially not with—" she pointed at me—"him."

The *hjadd*'s left eye twitched toward her. "Decontamination is required for all races visiting Talus qua'spah. I assure you that it is painless and non-invasive, and will only take a few minutes to perform. However, it is necessary for one to be bare of all accoutrements in order for the procedure to be completely effective."

Rain opened her mouth to protest, but I cut her off. "I understand that, sure. But in our culture, nudity is considered . . . um, taboo." The hjadd's head cocked slightly at this unfamiliar word. "Socially unacceptable," I added. "Particularly between sexes . . . genders, that is."

"Meaning, I'm not about to . . ." Rain glared at me, and shook her head. "No. Out of the question."

The hjadd was quiet for a moment. I had the sense that heshe was listening to someone else whom we couldn't see. "*It is strange for a dioecious species to be so reluctant about revealing their bodies,*" heshe said at last, hisher eyes twitching back and forth between us. "How is it possible for you to mate without exposing your reproductive organs?"

Now it was my turn to become red-faced. "We're . . . um, not mates. Just friends, that's all."

The hjadd's fin lowered, and hisher head moved back and forth upon hisher long neck. "*I now comprehend. However, the rules of the Talus remain. You may not pass this point without undergoing decontamination, and this procedure cannot begin until you have removed all your clothing.*"

I was about to respond when I heard a click in my right ear. Ted's voice came through my headset. "*Jules, do you copy? Is there a problem over there?*"

I prodded my mike. "Roger that, Captain . . . and, yeah, we've got a hold-up."

The hjadd waited patiently while I briefly explained the situation; Rain tapped into the comlink, but didn't say anything until I finished. When I was done, there was a short pause, then Ted came back online. "*Look, I understand this is uncomfortable for both of you, but Jas says that if you don't undergo decontamination, none of us will be allowed aboard. No two ways about it. Sorry.*"

Rain's mouth fell open. "Skipper, I can't . . ."

"*Rain, stop being such a prude. The rest of us are in the next room. If you don't want to be alone with Jules, you can wait until we join you, and then we can all get naked together. Or you can trust Mr. Truffaut to be a gentleman and keep his back to you. Either way, though, you're just going to . . .*"

"Okay, all right. I get the point. Over and out." Rain clicked off, then turned to give me a cold stare. "I swear to God, if you so much as . . ."

"Don't worry." I'd already turned away from her, setting my helmet down on the nearest bench. "I won't so much as peek. I promise."

Rain hesitated, then I heard her place her own helmet on the other bench. A few moments later, there was the soft sound of a zipper sliding open. From the corner of my eye, I saw that the hjadd had already vanished; apparently heshe realized that our primitive notions of privacy extended to himher as well.

A man of my word, I kept my promise to Rain. Not that it made much difference. The wall panels were just reflective enough that, even though I looked straight ahead, I was still able to see what was going on behind my back. I tried to distract myself by glancing down at my feet, but nonetheless it was hard to ignore the fact that a lovely young woman was peeling out of her undergarment just a few feet away.

And Rain was beautiful. No question about it. As much as I tried to ig-

nore her reflection, she had a body that I could easily fantasize curling up against. I bit my lower lip and tried to think about baseball . . . but when I looked up again, I saw that her gaze was fastened on the wall in front of her, and that she was studying my reflection as well.

Our eyes indirectly met for a moment, and for a second I thought I was a dead man. Yet my execution was delayed by the hjadd's voice, coming from some invisible source: *"Please close your eyes and extend your arms."*

I did as I was told, raising my arms straight out from my sides. A low hum surrounded us; although my eyelids were closed, nonetheless I could tell that the ceiling was gradually becoming brighter. For the next several minutes, we were bathed in ultraviolet radiation, followed by a hot, dry wind that whisked away dandruff and dead skin cells.

The humming ceased, the ceiling darkened, and the air became still once more. But just as I was about to open my eyes, I heard a whispered *thuff!* from somewhere behind me. An instant later, a white-hot needle jabbed me in the ass.

Rain yelped at the same moment I did, and I looked around to see her grabbing at her derriere. "What the hell was. . . ?"

"Many apologies," the hjadd said, still unseen to us. *"Those were darts containing mild antibiotics. They are harmless to you and will soon dissolve, but they help ensure that you're not carrying any micro-organisms harmful to our kind."*

"Great." She massaged her buttock where the dart had penetrated her skin. "I thought you said this would be painless and non-invasive."

"They lied," I muttered. Made sense, though; if heshe had told us what was coming, we might have refused. And it was only a sting, after all; the pain was already going away, leaving behind little more than a tiny bruise.

"Yeah, well . . . they're not the only ones." She glared at me. "You said you wouldn't peek."

"How did you know I did?"

"Because . . ." Her voice trailed off and she blushed, then quickly wrapped her arms across her chest and turned away from me. "So now what? Do we put on our suits?"

"That will not be necessary. Temporary garments are available to you." As the hjadd spoke, a wall panel slid open, revealing a small closet. *"Please put them on. They conform to your dimensions, and will keep you comfortable until your own clothes can be brought over from your ship."*

Hanging within the closet were several long shirt-like robes resembling dashikis, each embroidered with intricate patterns much like those on Jas's robes. I removed two, tossed one over to Rain, then pulled on the other. At the bottom of the closet were several pairs of sock-like boots which could be put on either foot; I slipped on two of them, and gave a pair to Rain. Once we were dressed and I had stored our suits in the closet, the hjadd spoke again. *"You may now proceed to your guest quarters. Transportation is waiting to take you there."*

The door on the other side of the room opened. Rain and I gave each other uncertain looks, and I gazed at the ceiling. "Just a second. I need to check with my people." The hjadd said nothing as I walked over to the bench where I'd left my headset. "Captain, are you there?"

•
 "We're here. What's taking so long?"

"Just finished decontamination. You're gonna love it." Rain rolled her eyes and I went on. "Look, the hjadd want us to go somewhere . . . to our quarters, or so they tell us. That means we're probably going to be separated, at least for a while. Should we. . . ?"

"Go ahead," Ted replied. "I'm sure you'll be all right. We'll meet up with you there."

"Roger that." I clicked off, then slipped the headset around my neck. Rain was waiting for a response; I gave her a nod and she shrugged, then we padded across the room toward the open door.

On the other side lay another tunnel, this one much shorter, ending at a sealed hatch only a dozen feet away. Resting upon a recessed track was a long, pill-shaped vehicle, its transparent canopy open at one end to expose six couch-like seats arranged in tandem. Obviously a tram of some sort. When I climbed into the front seat, with Rain taking the one directly behind me, the couches changed shape to conform to our bodies, with padded bars folding across us. The canopy slid shut; there was a prolonged wheeze as the compartment was depressurized, then the hatch spiraled open, and we shot down the tunnel . . .

And out into space.

II

Or so it seemed, for it appeared as if there was nothing on the other side of the canopy except cold, unglimmering stars.

Grabbing at the safety bar, I gasped in horror. For a moment, I thought we'd been jettisoned into the vacuum . . . then the cab passed through a ring, and I realized that the tram was a pneumatic tube running along the side of a thick cable.

We'd left the saucer where the *Pride* was docked, and now were being hurled through the Talus qua'spah. On either side of us, stretching out as far as we could see, floated a seemingly endless array of spheres, cylinders, disks, and wheels, all connected to one another by an intricate network of cables upon which other trams sprinted back and forth. Lights like a million votive candles gleamed from countless windows while, far above us, spacecraft of every conceivable shape and size moved in stately promenade.

"Oh . . ." That was all Rain could say; I didn't have to look back to know that she was awestruck. I seconded the motion, adding another *oh* for good measure. The Talus qua'spah was more than a habitat; it was a vast city of space, stunning in its beauty, humbling in its complexity.

We didn't get much of a chance to admire the view, though, because a few seconds later the cab took an abrupt left turn at a Y-shaped intersection and hurtled toward a large sphere. Just as it seemed that collision was unavoidable, a circular hatch opened at its equator; the safety bars held us within our couches as the cab decelerated, and then it entered the sphere.

We found ourselves in another station much like the one in the saucer. The cab glided to a halt with little more than a slight bump; another long wheeze, and the canopy slid open. I waited until my couch released me

from its grasp, then stood up on legs that felt as if they'd become rubber. Rain was just as unsteady; her hand shook when I took it to help her out of the cab.

"That was fun," I said. "Let's do it again."

"Sure. Any time." She let go of my hand, then looked around. "All right, so where are we now?"

As if in response, a door behind us peeled open; beyond it lay a short corridor, its hexagonal walls lined with burnished copper panels. "Um . . . we're here," I replied. "Wherever that is."

The door shut behind us as soon as we entered the passageway. Too late to turn back now, and nowhere to go but forward. So we slowly walked toward the door at the other end. It parted in half as soon as we approached it, and . . .

"Holy . . . !" Rain whispered.

She was getting pretty good at taking the words right out of my mouth. All I could do was stare.

A library, much like one might find in a nineteenth-century manor somewhere in England. Beneath a vaulted ceiling from which crystal chandeliers were suspended, we saw mahogany-paneled walls lined with brass-caged bookcases, their shelves filled with leather-bound volumes. Antique armchairs and sofas stood here and there upon a thick Persian carpet, with brass reading lamps resting on oak tables and lithographs of country scenes framed upon the walls. A spiral staircase led to an upper gallery, and a mellow fire crackled gently within a marble hearth at the far end of the room.

It was comfortable, and luxurious, and lovely, and totally unexpected. My first thought was that this place was nothing more than a clever illusion, perhaps another hologram. Yet the carpet was soft beneath my feet, and when I laid my hand upon the back of an armchair, I felt supple brown leather. No, it was really . . . real.

"What in the world?" Rain gazed around the room, her eyes wide. "How could they . . . I mean . . . ?"

"*It is very simple to explain,*" a familiar voice replied, and I nearly jumped a foot in the air when the *hjadd* we'd met in the reception area materialized beside me. *Heshe* regarded me with hisher usual stoicism, yet hisher fin rose slightly. "*I apologize. Did I startle you?*"

"Yes . . . yes, you did." My heart hammered against my chest, and I took a deep breath. "A little warning next time, please, um . . . what did you say your name was?"

"*I did not say.*" A short hiss of amusement. "*Since you have asked, though, I am Hahatahja Fah Tas-Saatja. I have been delegated to be your liaison while you are here.*"

"Hahatafahjasat . . ." It was a mouthful of a name; when I stumbled over the syllables, sacs on either side of hisher throat puffed outward. "Sorry. No offense . . . is it Fah for short? Or Haha?"

"*Fah. Please do not attempt to pronounce the rest . . . it would only be an insult.*" The throat-sacs deflated, and *heshe* raised a hand before I could go on. "*Your names, of course, are known. Jas Sa-Fhadda has already relayed that information to us.*"

"Yeah, sure." Maybe heshe preferred to be addressed as Fah, but I couldn't help but think of himher as Haha; heshe was definitely one for practical jokes. "We met aboard our ship. Nice guy."

"Jas said the same about yourself." Fah's head rose upon hisher neck, as if to inspect me more closely. *"In fact, heshe said you expressed an interest in our cuisine. Perhaps you will have that opportunity next evening, before the reception we plan to hold in your honor."*

Reception? This was news to me. I wondered if Ted knew about it yet. "We would be delighted," I replied, trying my hand at diplomacy. "And I'm sure. . . ."

"Excuse me," Rain said, interrupting us, "but you still haven't answered my question." She waved a hand at the room in which we stood. "How did you know what . . . I mean, how did you build all this?"

"Ah, yes . . ." Fah's eyes rotated to take in the library. *"It is a replica of the crew lounge of the Galileo. We duplicated it from images we found in the data banks of the Maria Celeste after we recovered it from Spindrift, and used it to help the surviving members of the expedition acclimate themselves once they were revived from biostasis. Since then, we have expanded it to serve as living quarters for human visitors."* Heshe pointed to the gallery. *"Your bedrooms are located up there, along with hygiene facilities. I hope the accommodations are suitable for your needs."*

"It's . . . very nice, thank you." Rain's voice was low; I could tell she was still trying to wrap her head around finding a Victorian library in an alien space colony. "I'm sure the others will . . . um, find it interesting."

As they spoke, I wandered over toward the hearth. As I suspected, the fire was just another holo; it cast no warmth, and the logs remained unconsumed. I picked up a book from a side table, only to discover that I was unable to open its cover. Stage props, nothing more. I hoped that the bathroom toilets were functional, or we'd be in big trouble.

"I'm pleased that you're satisfied with the arrangements." Fah cocked hisher head to one side, listened for a moment, then went on. *"Your companions are on the way. They will be joining you shortly. If there is nothing else I can do for you . . ."*

Before either of us could say anything, heshe vanished, winking out of existence as suddenly as heshe had appeared.

III

Rain stared at the place where Fah had stood, then let out her breath. "Just for once, I'd like to see himher use the door." An irate scowl. "And you're a big help . . . can't you learn to say their names correctly?"

"Sure, I can. Fah. Jas. Can't wait till we meet the one named Duh."

"Hush. They might be listening." Self-conscious, she wrapped her arms around herself. "Come to think of it," she added, glancing up at the ceiling, "we'd better watch what we say."

"Yeah. Easily offended, aren't they?" I sauntered over to the nearest bookcase and opened its cage, but wasn't able to remove any of the books upon its shelves. More props. "Next time we come here, we'll have to bring our own. . . ."

The door leading to the tram opened just then, and we turned to see

Ted walk in. "Ah, there you are," he said, giving us a wry grin. "Serves you right for getting ahead of us."

"Your idea, skipper." Rain smiled back at him. "You just missed our host. He was here a second ago."

"Fah? Met him while we were going through decontamination." The captain gazed around the library, apparently unsurprised by our surroundings. "Yeah, same place," he murmured. "Looks like they've fixed it up a little, though."

"Maybe they finally got some real books." Emily followed him through the door, followed by Ali, Goldstein, and Ash. The others were as startled by our surroundings as Rain and I had been, but Emily accepted it as a place where she'd been before. Seeing the two of us, she chuckled. "Nice pajamas."

"Thanks." I couldn't help but notice that they were all wearing their own clothes. Well, that made sense; they didn't have to put on EVA gear before leaving the ship. "They're comfortable enough, but I wouldn't mind going back to fetch my stuff. Think they'll let me do that?"

"I don't see why not, if you don't mind taking the roller coaster ride again." Emily sat down on a nearby sofa. "Doc's still on the *Pride*. We decided that we should follow protocol and leave someone aboard."

"Where's Jas?"

"Left us as soon as we came down the gangway. Guess his pals don't think he poses any sort of contamination threat." Ted sat down next to his wife. "All right, we're here," he said to Morgan. "So now what?"

Goldstein was still staring at the library. Hearing Ted, he glanced back at the captain. "Tomorrow we'll unload the cargo, and I'll begin trade negotiations . . . with Mr. Ash, of course. For now, though, we should make ourselves at home."

Ash had walked over to the hearth; he quietly gazed at the fake fire, trying to ignore the rest of us. No telling how long it had been since he'd last had a drink. Once again, I had to wonder what it must be like, to be able to hear everyone else's thoughts whether you wanted to or not. Nor was he the only one ill at ease; Ali kept glancing at the door, as if wishing that he, too, had remained aboard ship.

"Sounds like good advice." Ted yawned, stretched out his legs. "Been a long day. Going to be a long one tomorrow, too." He looked at Emily. "Should've brought some food over from the ship. I could use dinner."

"Fah said that a reception is going to be held for us tomorrow." I ran a fingertip across the back of an armchair. The upholstery wasn't real leather, but whatever it was, it felt like cowhide all the same. "We should get a good meal then."

"I wouldn't recommend it." Morgan peered up at a chandelier, almost as if speculating how much it was worth. "I've tried hjadd food. Rather disgusting."

"I'm with you," Emily said. "Besides, our systems may not be able to digest whatever they give us. I'll head back to the ship later, gather some provisions. Won't be much . . . sandwiches and coffee . . . but it'll get us through."

"Thank you." Ted stifled another yawn, then stood up. "Right. So let's rest up, and get ready to go to work tomorrow."

He headed for the stairs, apparently interested in checking out the guest quarters. Ali followed him, while Rain went over to Emily and quietly conferred with her. Morgan continued to stroll around the room, inspecting every artifact in the library with a trader's curiosity.

That left me with Ash. I walked over to join him at the fireplace. "So . . . penny for your thoughts?" He didn't respond, nor did he look away from the holoprojected flames. Apparently he wasn't in a talkative mood. "Well, look," I went on, "I'm going back to the ship in a little bit to fetch my clothes. If you'd like me to bring anything to you . . ."

"My bottle, you mean." It wasn't a question; he and I both knew better. Ash glanced over his shoulder at Morgan, who was out of earshot and not paying any attention to us. "It's in my cabin, in the locker," he added, keeping his voice low. "Morgan wants to keep me dry, but if you can get it for me. . . ."

"Sure." I had little doubt that he'd relax a bit if he could shut out everyone, if only for a little while. "And your. . . ?"

"My guitar, too, yes. Please." He favored me with a conspiratorial smile. "You're all right, Jules. You're easy to be around."

"Thanks . . . I guess."

"I meant that as a compliment. You should take it as such." Ash sighed, his gaze traveling to the fox-hunting scene above the mantel. "God, this is hard. My people should've never let Morgan talk them into sending me."

"Your people." I hesitated. "The Order of the Eye?"

Looking away from the lithograph, he stared straight at me. Once again, I felt a door open within my mind. "So . . . Jas knows," he whispered. "Heshe is aware of why I'm here."

All of a sudden, I found myself wishing that I'd kept my mouth shut. "I . . . yeah, I think so. Heshe asked if you belonged to . . ."

"I understand." Ash shook his head. "Don't worry. You're not involved in this . . . but I advise you to keep your distance. Things might get . . . strange."

"Aren't you the one who told me I should get used to strangeness?"

The smile returned. "Yes, I did, didn't I?" Then his face became solemn. "But there's degrees of strangeness, and just now—" a moment of hesitation — "I don't know what to believe."

And then he turned and walked away, leaving me to wonder what he'd meant by that.

TWELVE

Raw deal . . . Ash talks back . . . what do you do with two thousand paperweights? . . . getting the pink slip.

IV

Next morning, Rain and I returned to the *Pride of Cucamonga* to unload the cargo. There were no quarrels this time around; in fact, you almost could've sworn we'd been working together for years. Of course, things were made easier by the fact that we had an unexpected bit of help.

Since the last time I'd visited the *Pride*, a second gangway had been extended from the saucer; this one led to the primary airlock. It made it a little easier for us to get back aboard. Once Rain and I suited up and exited the ship through the docking port, we discovered a half-dozen things that resembled bowling balls with two arms waiting just outside. Doc informed us that, according to Jas, these were Talus 'bots tasked to carry away the cargo. A small, sled-like craft hovered nearby, piloted by a hjadd who never spoke to us but waited patiently while we opened the cargo modules. I guessed this was the one named Duh, although I was careful not to say as much over the comlink.

The gravity field within the saucer was temporarily switched off; since I didn't need to operate the pod, I helped Rain untie the bales and move them to the lateral hatches, where the 'bots captured them and, in turn, carried the massive rolls over to the sled. Once its bed was full, the sled would glide away, disappearing through a hatch on the other side of the hangar and returning a few minutes later to take on another load.

It didn't take long for us to get used to working with the 'bots, and although Duh remained quiet the entire time, heshe seemed to understand exactly what we were doing. At one point, though, while waiting for the sled to return, I happened to notice four figures—two humans, along with a pair of hjadds in environment suits—watching us from a cupola overlooking the bay. I had little doubt who they were: Morgan, Jas, and Fah, with Ash quietly standing nearby, making sure that all the merchandise had safely arrived.

It took about four hours for us to empty both modules. Once Rain and I were done, Duh disappeared without so much as a thank-you, the 'bots trailing hisher sled as it returned to its hatch. Rain and I cycled back through the airlock. Much to my surprise, Rain allowed me to share the ready-room with her, so long as I promised to keep my back turned. Even so, we ended up helping each other remove our gear; she blushed a few times, but otherwise didn't object to my presence. One more sign that she was getting used to working with me.

After we put on our civvies, we went back to the saucer. At least we didn't have to endure decontamination again. Just as well; we were bone-tired, and all we wanted was to get a bite to eat and perhaps a nap.

Ted, Emily, and Ali were waiting for us in the library. They'd had little to do while Rain and I were busting our rears except listen in on the comlink, but Emily had made lunch for us from the provisions she'd brought over from the ship. The five of us were working our way through a plate of turkey-and-cheese sandwiches when the door opened and Morgan stormed in, trailed by Ash.

"We've been robbed." His face was dark with anger, and beneath his left arm he carried a small, oblong object wrapped in silky white fabric.

"Come again?" Ted stared at him, then glanced at Rain and me. "Was anything missing?"

"No, dammit," Morgan snarled. "I didn't mean it that way. Everything's accounted for, down to the last pound. It's just that . . ." Inarticulate with rage, he jabbed a finger at Ash. "A fat lot of good you were! I was looking for an inside lead, and all you could do was . . ."

"Don't blame me." Beneath his robe's hood, Ash's expression was neutral. "I've told you what I can do and what I can't, and I can't . . ."

"Like hell! I've seen you do it dozens of times." Morgan glared at him. "So help me, if you've been drinking . . ."

"No, but after putting up with you all morning, I need a stiff one." Ash headed for the stairs leading to the gallery, no doubt to retrieve the jug of bearshine from his bedroom. I hoped that no one would wonder how it had made its way from the *Pride* to our quarters.

Morgan started to go after him, then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he placed the cloth-wrapped object on the lunch table, then slumped into an armchair. Putting his face in his hands, he let out a long, depressed sigh. "I'm ruined," he muttered. "God, I'm ruined. . . ."

"Calm down." Emily poured a cup of coffee and carried it over to him. "Just tell us what happened. Did the negotiations go bad?"

"Hell, yes, they went bad! You think I'm happy about this?" Raising his head, he regarded her as if she were an idiot. "Worst goddamn deal I ever made! We were screwed the minute we walked in there, all because that alcoholic son of a . . ."

"It's not my fault!" Ash's voice came as an angry shout from the gallery above us. Looking up, we saw him standing at the railing. He'd pulled back his hood, and there was an uncorked jug in his hand. "I did the best I could, but I can't . . ."

"Back off, both of you." Ted rose to his feet. "Mr. Goldstein, get a grip. And you—" he glared at Ash—"put that thing away, or so help me I'll put it under lock and key and you'll be dry until we get back home."

Ash stared back at the captain. Apparently realizing this wasn't an empty threat, he reluctantly jammed the cork back in the jug. "That's better," Ted said, then turned to Morgan. "Right . . . now how about telling what happened, without any accusations."

Morgan let out his breath. Before he could begin, though, my curiosity got the better of me. "What's this thing?" I asked, reaching across the table toward the wrapped object he'd brought in with him.

"Don't touch that!" Morgan snatched it away from me, then seemed to reconsider. With a resigned shrug, he put it back on the table. "Aw, what's the point? Go ahead, open it up. Doesn't matter . . . you'll be seeing plenty more like it, soon enough."

I picked up the object. For something little more than twelve inches tall, it was fairly heavy. Carefully unwrapping the cloth, I found myself holding what appeared to be a small, black obelisk. Carved from opaque, unreflective stone and attached to a matching square base, it resembled a rectangular pylon that had been given a ninety-degree twist at its center.

"What is this?" Vaguely amused, I hefted it in my hand. About ten pounds or so, I reckoned. "Some sort of paperweight?"

"It's called a *gnosh*." Morgan studied me. "Do you like it?"

"Well . . . yeah, I guess so." Actually, I did like it. A lot. The *gnosh* fit smoothly within my palm, its surface warm to the touch. A small thrill raced down my back that was pleasant, almost sexual. "Can I have it?"

Morgan shook his head. "That's my sample. I've give you one later . . ."

lord knows I'll have plenty to spare." Another sigh of dejection. "Two thousand, to be exact."

"Two thousand of . . ." Ali stared at the gnosh. "These things? In exchange for. . . ?"

"That's right." Morgan picked up the cloth in which the gnosh had been wrapped. "This is what we're getting in trade for our cargo." Carefully draping the cloth over his hand, he reached for the obelisk. "Jules, if you'll please. . . ?"

I found myself reluctant to give it up. Morgan was insistent, though, so I surrendered the gnosh to him. The moment it left my hand, the ecstasy I'd felt left me. "Wow," I mumbled. "That was interesting."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Rain looked first at me, then at the gnosh. "Let me see that."

"Oh, no, you don't." Ted shook his head, then turned to Morgan. "What is this thing? What does it do?"

"So far as I can tell, it's an emotion enhancer." Morgan swaddled the gnosh within the cloth, then placed it on the table. "Touch it, and it gives you pleasure . . . or at least if you're in a neutral frame of mind, as Mr. Truffaut was. Since I'm rather pissed off just now, I'm being cautious about handling it. Otherwise I might be tempted to strangle Drunko the Clown up there."

"Keep it up, and I'll show you my next trick." Ash was making his way down the stairs. At least he'd put away the jug, but not before he'd sneaked one last slug of bearshine; I noticed that he carefully held the banister as he descended.

"Steady, gents." Ted bent down to study the gnosh. Although it was safely wrapped again, he was prudent not to touch it. "So what else has Fah offered us?"

"What else?" A short, humorless laugh. "That's it! Two thousand of these stupid things." Again, Morgan shook his head. "Oh, did I get screwed . . ."

"What did you expect?" Ali picked up the gnosh, gave it a casual inspection. "We just brought them two and a half tons of weeds, for heaven's sake. What did you think you were going to get for them? The key to the galaxy?"

"Yup . . . that's exactly what he thought." Ash was visibly swaying as he reached the bottom of the stairs. He shuffled toward us, his breath reeking of booze. "Morgan believed that he could get something for nothing . . . faster-than-light drive, advanced nanotech, some other kind of miracle technology, all for just a few bales of hemp." He grinned and shook his head. "Manhattan for a handful of beads and shiny trinkets . . . but this time, the Injuns outfoxed the white men."

"Ash . . ." Morgan's eyes were cold. "I'm warning you, don't . . ."

"Don't what? Disclose the details of your sleazy little deal?" Ash reached beneath his robe, pulled out the squeezebulb I'd given him. It was half full of bearshine; apparently he'd filled it before leaving the jug in his room. "Give up already," he went on as he unsealed the nipple. "There's nothing you can do about it now."

He took a drink, then turned to look at me. "Get this," he said as if none of the others were around. "Morgan brought me aboard . . . brought me along, that is . . . 'cause he thought I might give him an inside edge. I

mean, what could be better than to have a telepath at your side when you're doing business? That way, you can tell what the other guy is thinking when you're trying to drive a bargain. Great idea, really . . . except there's just one catch." A pause. "C'mon, Jules. You're a smart lad . . . what do you think it is?"

He was clearly waiting for an answer. I thought about it for a moment. "Umm . . . you don't know *hjadd*?"

"Bingo!" Ash almost tripped over the hem of his robe as he wheeled away from me. "I can read their minds, all right . . . but it doesn't mean a goddamn thing if I don't know *what* they're thinking!"

"That's not what you told me." Morgan's face was red. "You said you could . . ."

"No. I told you that I could pick up their emotions. No problem there." Snickering beneath his breath, he sauntered over to Rain and flung an arm around her shoulders. "In fact, you wanna know how they feel about your boss?" Ash confided to her in a stage whisper. "They think . . . well, not think exactly, but y'know what I mean . . . he's a fool for even trying to pull something like this."

"Look who's talking." Rain irritably peeled his arm from her.

Ash didn't seem to notice. He sailed away once more, taking another mighty swig of corn liquor. "But what they actually *think* . . . well, damned if I know! They don't know Anglo, really . . . they just use those . . . those whatchamacallits . . . to translate our language into their own, and vice-versa. Their *coga . . . congi . . .* cognitive processes are in their own tongue. And believe me, Fah and Jas were real careful not to even think about any of the few words of our language that they actually understand."

"So you couldn't read their minds." Ted had raised a hand to his face, and he was trying to hide his smile behind it.

"You got it, Cap'n." Ash propped himself up against the back of a chair. "Y'know, just between you and me . . . I think they've dealt with telepaths before. 'Cause as soon as Fah saw me comin', he . . . heshe, I mean . . . put up a mental wall, and the only thing I could make out was the vague impression that heshe needed to pee."

"The Order of the Eye." I hadn't meant to blurt that out, but at that moment it seemed pointless to keep it a secret any longer.

Morgan stared at me. "How did you know about that?"

"Jas asked me if Ash belonged to them. When I visited himher in hisher quarters." I hesitated, realizing that I'd said more than I should have. "They knew about him already. How, I don't . . ."

"So why didn't you . . . ?" Morgan stopped himself, and shook his head. "Never mind. Doesn't matter anyway." He picked up the gnosh from where Ali had left it on the table, turned it over in his hands. "Two thousand tchotchkes," he said quietly. "Well, maybe it's not a total loss. If I sell them wholesale at two hundred colonials per unit, perhaps I can make back the overhead costs."

"We'll get paid, won't we?" Emily asked.

"Rest assured, I'll abide by the terms of my contract. No commission, though, I'm afraid." Then he looked at Ash. "As for you . . ."

"What?" Ash tipped back his head and held the squeezebulb above his

mouth. He crushed it within his fist until the last drop of bearshine was gone, then tossed the empty bulb aside. "You're going to fire me? You know better."

I wondered what he meant by that, but before I could say anything, Ted let out his breath. "Well, there it is. We'll load up the . . . paperweights, or whatever . . . and go home. Maybe next time we'll get a better deal, but for now . . ." He shrugged. "At least it's a start."

The start of what, he didn't say. No one else was willing to speculate, either. All I knew was that not even feeling up a gnosh could have made anyone feel better just then.

V

I went upstairs and lay down, intending to take a nap. But I had just dozed off when Ted knocked on my door. Fah had appeared again, this time to inform him that the shipment of gnoshes was packed and ready to be put aboard the *Pride*. Since the captain wanted to return home as soon as politely possible—we still had the reception to attend that evening, but he'd scheduled our departure from Talus qua'spah for 0900 in the morning—he needed Rain and me to load the cargo that afternoon.

No problem, so far as I was concerned. Rain didn't voice any objections either, so we headed back to the saucer. As we were leaving the guest quarters, though, Ali asked if he could join us; he was bored, and wanted to watch the load-in from the ship. Couldn't blame him very much. Ash had passed out on the downstairs couch, and from behind the closed door of Morgan's bedroom I could hear him discussing something with Ted and Emily—the details of the deal he'd made with the hjadd, I assumed. So there was nothing for our pilot to do. At least Rain and I were keeping busy.

Once we returned to the *Pride* and suited up again, we found Duh and hisher minions waiting for us in the hangar. The sled was loaded with square metal crates, each four feet wide on the side. I opened one before we put it aboard, and found that it contained fifty gnoshes, each individually sealed in plastic, stacked and separated from one another by removable dividers. Either the hjadd had packed the crates in a hurry, or else they'd decided what they wanted to give us in exchange for our cannabis long before we got there. I wondered if Morgan was aware of this.

So Rain and I spent the next four and a half hours loading the crates aboard the *Pride*; there were forty in all, and once again we alternated between Cargo One and Cargo Two, making sure that the mass was evenly distributed on either side of the ship. The hjadd 'bots did much of the work for us, carrying the crates from the sled to the cargo hatches, where either Rain or I would take possession of them and push them over to the inside decks to be lashed down. Once this was done, she and I carefully counted the crates, using light pens and data pads to maintain inventory control. Unless the hjadd had decided to put rocks inside some of those boxes, we had exactly two thousand gnoshes to take home. I hoped Morgan was as shrewd of a businessman as he claimed he was, or otherwise he'd be stuck with a whole lot of paperweights.

Rain and I cycled through the airlock for what we hoped was the last time, but when we left the ready-room, we discovered Doc Schachner

waiting for us at the airlock. Apparently Ali had decided that he'd had enough of extraterrestrial hospitality; with Ted's permission, he'd elected to remain aboard the *Pride* for the remainder of the trip, taking over for Doc as watchman. Which was fine with our chief engineer; he wanted to see Talus qua'spah for himself. So we escorted him down the tunnel to the decontamination facility, and waited for him while he endured the strip-and-jab procedure himself.

Another tram ride, which by now had become almost dull, and we were back at the library. Ash was still crashed out on the couch, although someone had rolled him over so that he wouldn't snore so much. The door to Ted and Emily's room was shut, so I figured they were spending some quality time together. I was thinking about taking a siesta when Morgan appeared at the gallery railing. Would I please come up for a private meeting? It didn't sound like I had much choice, so I went upstairs to his room.

For a race with limited exposure to human needs, the hjadd had furnished our rooms well. A bed, a desk, an armchair, and a private bath complete with toilet, sink, and shower: nothing fancy, but comfortable all the same. Morgan had turned his quarters into a temporary office; a comp was open on his desk, with papers spread out on either side of it. He closed the door behind us, then took a seat in the only chair in the room.

"Did the load-in go well?" he asked.

"Sure. No problem." I shrugged. "Forty crates, fifty items per crate. Two thousand paperweights in all."

He frowned. "I'd just as soon that you not refer to them as paperweights. Once Janus puts them on the market, they'll be sold as alien artifacts . . . mood enhancers, most likely. What our customers do with them is their own business, of course, but 'paperweights' makes them sound trivial."

"Sure. Whatever." So far as I was concerned, he could call them OI' Doc Morgan's Magic Elixir and pitch them as rheumatism cures. "Anyway, they're aboard, safe and sound."

"Uh-huh. Good." He didn't say anything else for a moment, but instead simply regarded me with what might have been a forlorn expression if it had extended to his eyes. But there was something in his gaze that was cold and ruthless, and I began to realize that whatever he wanted to discuss with me, it wasn't good.

"Jules," he said, after letting me stand there for a little while, "you've disappointed me. When I interceded on your behalf, it was because I thought you'd be a major asset. Indeed, I believed you'd be a good employee. But now. . ."

Morgan sighed, running a hand across the top of his shaved head as he glanced up at the ceiling. "What you've done . . . your conduct the last couple of days . . . has been nothing short of a betrayal of my confidence. At the very least, it was unprofessional. At worst, it undermined everything I was trying to achieve."

"Huh?" I blinked. "What are you. . .?"

"I asked you to stay away from Mr. Ash, and not approach him without my permission. I explained to you that his . . . well, his talent . . . makes

him sensitive, and that your dealings with him should be minimal. But instead, you chose to ignore my request, and . . .”

“So I spoke to him. Big deal.”

“No.” He scowled at me. “It’s worse than that, and you know it. You brought him bearshine from the ship, just when I needed his judgment to be unimpaired. And that . . .”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” I snapped. “You’re not sticking this on me. I saw Ash this morning before he went into that meeting with you and Fah, and he was cold sober.”

“No, he wasn’t. He was hung over.”

“Maybe so . . . but that doesn’t mean he was drunk.” I shook my head. “Either way, it didn’t matter. Ash couldn’t read Fah’s mind because he didn’t know his language. All he could get were vague impressions. He told you that himself.”

“Yes, he did. But you also kept from me the fact that Jas knew that Ash belongs to the Order of the Eye. This is something you should have reported to me at once.”

“Sorry, but I was under the impression that you wanted me to mind my own business.”

“When it comes to something like this, your business is my business.”

“In that case, Mr. Goldstein, you should pay closer attention to your business.” I couldn’t help but smile. “Funny thing about all those paperweights—” his left eyelid ticked as I said this “—for something you bought just a few hours ago, they looked as if they’d already been packed for awhile. Either the hjadd are really, really efficient, or they’d decided upon the terms long before we got here. If that’s the case, nothing Ash could’ve told you would have made any difference.”

An icy stare. “Don’t tell me how to negotiate a deal, son. I was making my first million when you were still in diapers.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t rely on telepaths.” Something occurred to me just then, a thought that had eluded me until that moment. “Ash is a good guy,” I went on, “but as a reliable source, he’s got a lot to be desired. Did you know, when you got him to read my mind while I was in jail, that he got the facts mixed up? I didn’t betray my brother . . . he betrayed me. But that’s not what he told you, was it?”

“How did you. . . ?” He stopped. “You talked to Rain, didn’t you?”

“She told me a little, yeah . . . but I didn’t figure out the rest until just a second ago. I thought your people had somehow managed to access my Academy files, but that wasn’t how you found out about my past, was it? Instead, you sent Ash to see me in jail.”

He shrugged. “So?”

“So, what does his little mistake tell you about his reliability? Sure, he may be able to dig into people’s brains . . . but for him to stay sane, he has to drink. And you should know better than to trust whatever a drunk tells you.”

“Yes, well . . . I’ll be having some words with Mr. Ash once he wakes up. For now, my primary concern is with you.” Morgan paused. “I’m afraid I’ve had to reconsider the terms of our arrangement, Mr. Truffaut. Once our business here is concluded, I won’t be needing you any longer.”

"You mean, I'm fired."

"Consider it a termination of contract, effective once we've returned to Coyote. You'll be paid for services rendered, of course . . . but you will no longer be employed by Janus, which means that you will no longer be eligible for its benefits."

It took me a second to realize what he meant by that. The fact that I'd be evicted from my room at the Soldier's Joy was the least of my problems. More important was the fact that Morgan had posted bail for me, with his lawyer seeing to it that my court case had been remanded to a future date. While I was working for him, it was doubtful that the magistrates would ever take serious legal action against me. But once I was no longer a Janus employee, I wouldn't have that protection . . . and the next time I showed up in court, the maggies would have fresh meat to barbecue.

"You son of a bitch," I murmured. "You know what that's going to do to me."

A cold smile stole across Morgan's face. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he replied, then he turned around in his chair to pick up some papers from his desk. "That's all. You may leave now."

My legs felt rubbery as I turned toward the door. "Oh, and one more thing," Morgan added. "Please remember that we've been invited to a reception this evening." He looked up at me again. "And you are expected to attend . . . I think the hjadd would consider it rude if any of our party were absent."

I should've said something about his own lack of manners, but this was one of those moments when your brain can't find the right words. "Please don't slam the door on the way out," Morgan said as I left the room.

Screw him. I slammed it anyway.

THIRTEEN

Weird food . . . feeling kind of ethereal . . . party with the aliens . . . a momentary lapse of reason.

VI

I went back to my room and lay down again, but this time didn't even try to take a nap. All I could do was stare at the ceiling. My mind was a blank, save for an elaborate daydream about somehow luring Morgan into the *Pride's* airlock and giving him the heave-ho. For a revenge fantasy, it was rather satisfying, but out of the question. The Talus would probably object to us mucking up their space colony with our garbage.

After a long while, I sighed and got out of bed. Nothing I could do now except try to get along as best I could for the rest of the trip. At least I'd meet the hjadd. It'd give me something to talk about with my fellow prison inmates, once I was deported back to Earth.

When I left my room, I saw that everyone had gathered around the table where we'd been having our meals. Everyone except Morgan and

Ash, that is; Goldstein's door was still closed, and I noticed that Ash was missing from the couch where he'd passed out a few hours earlier. The others gave me wary looks as I came downstairs; I didn't have to ask to know that they'd already learned I'd been canned.

Ted confirmed this by offering an apologetic hand. "Heard about what happened," he said quietly. "I'm really sorry. Morgan shouldn't have done that to you."

"Yeah, well . . . guess he needs a scapegoat." I was glad to get whatever sympathy I could just then. "Would it be too much to ask if you could put in a good word for me?"

"I could, but—" a helpless shrug—"it wouldn't make much difference. Once he makes up his mind, he seldom changes it."

Emily walked over to join us. "Anyway, you may not be the only one who's going to be looking for another job." She cautiously glanced up at the gallery, making sure that we weren't being overheard. "When we talked to him a little while ago, he said something about putting our contracts under review. My guess is that, after this run, he's going to replace us with another crew . . . probably from Earth."

I stared at her. "What for? You guys haven't done anything."

"Like you said . . . he's looking for scapegoats." A scowl crept across her face. "So far as he's concerned, this trip has been a complete bust, and Morgan's the kind of person who blames anyone but himself. Besides, he has to tell his investors something, so . . ."

I felt a soft hand on my arm, and looked around to find Rain standing beside me. She didn't say anything, nor did she have to; the look in her eyes was sufficient. For a brief instant, I was almost angry with her—despite what Emily said, Rain was the last person Morgan would fire, if only because of reasons of patronage—but it quickly passed. Rain had nothing to do with any of this; the fact that she was sympathetic at all toward me showed just how far our relationship had come in such a short time.

"Thanks," I murmured, and she forced a smile and nodded. At a loss for words, I glanced over at the table. "So . . . what's going on here? Coffee break?"

"Something like that." Doc stepped aside to let me look. "Although I don't think anything here would qualify as coffee."

Spread out across the table were an assortment of platters, plates, and bowls, each containing food of some variety or another. One bowl held something that looked like blue seaweed; another was filled with a murky black porridge. Limp green vegetables that resembled overcooked bean sprouts were piled upon a platter; next to it was a plate of small brown cubes a little like rice cakes. In the middle of the table was a bottle filled with some reddish-gold liquid that might have been maple syrup.

"Dinner?" I bent over the black porridge, inspected it a little more closely. It smelled vile, and the chunky stuff floating around in it didn't look very appetizing, either.

"Uh-huh." Doc picked up the bottle, experimentally tilted it back and forth. "Fah and a couple of hjadds delivered it while you were napping . . . along with a few other things. Heshe said that, since we wouldn't be able

to eat at the reception along with everyone else, we were being served dinner in advance." Twisting open the cap, he reached for a nearby glass. "Must be the local brew. Might as well try it out . . ."

"Might as well not." Ted hurried over to take the bottle away from him. "We have no idea whether any of this is edible or not. And since we don't have a physician aboard . . ."

"Oh, c'mon." Doc raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You don't seriously think they'd try to poison us, do you?"

"No, but . . ."

"He's right." Rain eyed a plate of something that looked like rancid cabbage. "I wouldn't eat this stuff if you pointed a gun to my head."

I picked up one of the cakes. It had a granular texture and a nice, spicy odor; I was greatly tempted to have a bite. "I dunno. If we don't at least try some of it, they might take offense. . . ."

"Put it down, Jules. That's an order." Ted frowned at me. "This is your fault, you know. If you hadn't told Jas you'd like to sample their cuisine . . ."

"Hey, I was just trying to be polite." I reluctantly put the cake back on the plate. "How was I to know that heshe would take me seriously?"

"Yes, well . . . perhaps not, but the last thing we need now is to have someone come down with food poisoning." Emily sighed. "If they ask, we'll just have to tell a little white lie and say that we enjoyed it very much." She paused. "Maybe I'll dump some of it down the toilet, to make it look like we've eaten."

"That might work. As for now . . ." Ted pointed to the other side of the table. "We've been brought our evening clothes. Those, at least, I know we can wear . . . so long as we're careful."

Stacked upon the table were several off-white bundles; on top of each was what appeared to be a small plastic air mask. Rain picked up one of the bundles; as she unfolded it, we saw that it was a long, white robe, similar to the one Ash wore except without a hood. Intricate patterns were stitched across its thick, plush fabric. "What is this, anyway?" she asked, holding it up against her. "We're supposed to put these on?"

"It's called a *sha*." Emily replied. "Ted and I were given ones just like these, the first time we were here. Consider it an honor . . . apparently they have some ceremonial significance."

"Okay, but what do you mean by being careful?" So far as I could tell, they were no more menacing than the outfits Rain and I had worn after we'd gone through decontamination.

"They're sensitive to electrodermal charges from the skin . . . see?" To demonstrate, Emily took the sha Rain had opened and slipped it on over her clothes. Rolling back a sleeve of her work shirt, she allowed the sha's bell sleeve to rest against her forearm. A moment passed, then its whorl-like patterns turned a pale shade of yellow. "That means I'm calm, but if I get angry—" she closed her eyes and concentrated, and the pattern became black—"the sha shows that, too."

"Oh, great." Doc shook his head. "That means we have to make sure no one gets pissed off."

"It's not so bad," Emily added. "They're really quite comfortable. I've found that, if you have a T-shirt and knickers on underneath, it mitigates

the sensitivity a bit. So long as you keep control of your emotions, you'll be fine."

"And what if we decide to come as we are?"

"Can't do that." Ted let out his breath. "Maybe we can get away without eating the food they've offered us, but showing up without these will definitely be considered rude. Sorry, but that's the way it is." He picked up one of the air masks. "Fah told us these contain translators. You activate them by touching this little button." He pointed to a small stud recessed within one side of the mask. "Don't use it unless you have to, though, okay? Just let me do the talking."

Doc regarded the mask with suspicion. "They definitely have a low tolerance for cultural differences, don't they?"

"I just don't want any misunderstandings, that's all." Ted glanced at his watch. "We're expected in about an hour or so. Everyone go change, and we'll meet back here."

"And then what?" I asked.

"Then we're off to the party." Ted grinned. "Don't worry. Remember, we're the guests of honor. What could go wrong?"

VII

Taking the sha and air mask under my arm, I went back up to my room and put them on. It felt like I was wearing a bathrobe, but once I tied its sash in place and hung the air mask around my neck, the sha was pleasantly warm, its patterns taking on a subtle yellow glow. When I experimented a little by recalling my earlier fantasy about pitching Morgan through an airlock, though, they gradually turned black. All right, then: no more nasty thoughts about the boss, or at least not until I was back in my own duds.

I was the first person to return to the library. Everyone else was still in their rooms. In hindsight, I realized that perhaps I should have taken a bath. Too late for that, though; I'd just have to wait for the others. So I puttered around the room, looking at the lithographs on the walls while trying to ignore the growling in my stomach. Perhaps I could make a sandwich. . . .

My gaze fell upon the food the hjadd had brought us. Emily had left some turkey-and-cheese sandwiches on the table, but hadn't yet disposed of the alien repast. The porridge still looked obscene, and I've always disliked cabbage and bean sprouts regardless of their color, but the cakes were awfully tempting. I picked up one, peered at it closely. It looked no more sinister than a chocolate brownie, and it smelled positively delicious.

What the hell. I was hungry, and I was tired of sandwiches. I took a tentative nibble of the cake; it had a satisfying crunch, and tasted like gingerbread spiced with nutmeg, albeit with a strong herbal aftertaste. I swallowed, waited to see what would happen next. When I didn't have an urge to vomit, I glanced up at the gallery to make sure that no one was watching, then ate the rest. And then, simply because I wanted to, I helped myself to another.

I was on my third cake when a door upstairs opened and shut. I stuffed the rest of it in my mouth and chewed as fast as I could. I'd just wiped the incriminating crumbs from the corners of my mouth when Ash came

downstairs. He must have slept off the booze, because he didn't stumble on the way down. He stopped at the bottom of the steps, regarded me with curious eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just waiting for everyone to show up." I noticed that he wasn't wearing a sha, but instead his own robe. "Didn't you get one of these?" I asked, plucking at the sleeve of my outfit.

"Yeah, but I'm not putting it on." He didn't bother to explain why, but instead continued to study me. "You're feeling guilty about something. What is it?"

I stepped away from the table, hoping that he wouldn't subject me to a deep probe. The patterns of my robe had turned red, though; I tried to make the color go away by thinking about something else. "Don't worry about it. How did things go with Morgan?"

"Did he fire me, too, you mean?" Ash shook his head. "He's not going to do that . . . not so long as I belong to the Order. We've got too much on him." A cynical smile that quickly faded. "Sorry I got you into trouble. That wasn't my intention."

"Nah. Don't worry about it." For some reason, I wasn't as angry as I had been. Indeed, I'd come to accept my situation as inevitable. "Would've happened sooner or later, I guess."

"Hmm . . . yes, if you say so." Ash's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah. I'm great." Although I wished he hadn't interrupted me when he did. Those cakes were pretty good; I could have used another one.

He was about to say something else when another door opened and shut. A moment later, Morgan came downstairs, tying the sash of his robe around himself. When he saw Ash and me, his sha's patterns turned dark brown; he avoided looking at either of us, though, but instead marched over to the fireplace, where he stood with his back to us. He shouldn't have been so nervous; any animosity I'd felt toward him had disappeared, replaced instead by a vague sense of amusement. Hard to believe that I'd once respected him; in fact, I couldn't help but think that he looked like nothing more than a fat old guy in a hotel bathrobe.

It wasn't long before the rest of our group joined us. As I thought, both Rain and Emily had taken baths. Rain's hair was still a little wet, but that only seemed to add to her sensuality. For the first time, I truly realized what a sexy creature she was, and how much I'd love to get beneath that robe of hers. There must have been a certain look in my eyes, for when she turned my way a blush appeared on her face that matched the color of her sha. Yeah, she knew what I was thinking . . . and so what? I was a red-blooded, heterosexual male, and proud of it.

Meanwhile, Emily had walked over to the table. She glanced at the platter holding the spice cakes, and I wondered whether she'd notice that two or three were missing. Perhaps she did, because she turned to Ted. Before she could say anything, though, Fah suddenly materialized.

"Are you ready?" heshe asked no one in particular.

Ted glanced at the rest of us, making sure we were all present. "Yes, we are. Where should we go?"

"The tram will transport you to the Great Hall." Fah raised a hand toward the door, which opened on its own. *"Please board it at your earliest convenience. We are waiting for you."*

We walked down the corridor to the tram station, where we found a car parked at the platform, its canopy already open. As I climbed into a rear seat, I had a sudden urge to invite Rain to sit in my lap. No need for that, of course; there was plenty of room for all of us. So I shut my mouth and kept my horny little hands to myself, and instead pulled the safety bar into place.

I'd been aboard the tram enough times already that the trip should have been familiar, but on this occasion we didn't return to our ship. Instead, we were transported deeper into Talus qua'spah. As the car shot through the tubes, taking one sharp turn after another, I found myself staring at the vast habitat as if seeing it for the first time. All those lights, their colors blurring together as if caught in a kaleidoscope, fascinated me as never before; I stared at them in amazement, feeling like a kid riding the best roller coaster in the universe. At one point I laughed out loud, an unselfconscious expression of childish delight that caused Rain to glance back at me in puzzlement.

The car took a long, spiraling turn, then hurtled straight toward an enormous sphere. A couple of thousand feet in diameter, lights gleamed from hundreds of windows along its sides, while dozens of tramways converged upon its equator. I was still gaping at it as the car began to decelerate; it entered a portal and glided to a halt at a station identical to ones we'd visited before.

"Welcome to Talus caan-saah," a disembodied voice said as we disembarked from the tram. *"The door to your right leads to an airlock."* Right on cue, the sphincter door swirled open, revealing a small anteroom. *"At this point, you will need to put on your breathing apparatus."*

The door irised shut behind us, and we took a moment to fit the air masks over the lower part of our faces. So far as I could tell, they didn't contain their own air supply, but instead reduced the nitrogen of the ambient atmosphere while boosting the oxygen levels and removing carbon dioxide. They were obviously designed to be idiot-proof, yet even so, I struggled to adjust the elastic straps of mine. For some reason, my fingers felt thick and clumsy, the straps frustratingly complicated; long after everyone else had theirs in place, I was still trying to get mine to fit correctly. Finally Ted stepped over to give me a hand.

"You're in a silly way tonight," he murmured, untwisting the straps from where I'd tangled them behind my head. "What did you do, sneak off with Ash's booze?"

I didn't know how to answer that, so I simply shrugged as I suppressed the crazy giggle that wanted to rise from my throat. Ash stared at me, his expression unfathomable behind his own mask, but I could've cared less what he or Ted or anyone else thought. I was having the time of my life.

Apparently someone was watching to see how we were doing, because as soon as my problem was solved, there was a prolonged hiss as the atmosphere was changed out. Another door opened, this one leading to a long corridor with one more door at the opposite end.

The others were calm as they marched toward the corridor, yet for no reason at all, I became anxious. Unbidden, my mind began to concoct all sorts of horrors awaiting us beyond that door. Medieval dungeons where we'd be stripped naked and tortured upon racks. Operating theaters filled with hjadd doctors waiting to dissect us alive. An underground coal mine on Hjarr where we would work as slaves until we dropped dead. Oh, sure, they'd told us that we'd be attending a reception in our honor . . . but what did they *really* have in mind?

My steps faltered, and I hesitated just before we reached the door. "Y'know, maybe I should go back to the ship," I muttered. "Check on Ali, see how he's doing. . ."

"Jules, what the hell is wrong with you?" Ted's voice was muffled by his mask as he turned to look at me. "I swear, you've been acting weird ever since . . ."

"Sorry. Never mind." I shook my head. "Just feeling kinda ethereal, that's all."

He stared at me for another moment, as if trying to decide whether it might be a good idea to let me return to the ship. Then he sighed and moved toward the door. "Well, we're here. Let's see what . . ."

Then the door spiraled open, and we saw what.

VIII

More specifically:

A vast amphitheater, whose steep walls sloped upward to a domed ceiling supported by flying buttresses, from which hung slender pennants inscribed with what seemed to be several different languages. Arranged in tiers along the walls were dozens of glassed-in cells resembling the box seats of a sports arena; within each one were small figures, none of which were even remotely human.

The amphitheater floor was nearly the size of a baseball field, with a long aisle leading straight down its center toward a raised dais. On either side of the aisle, separated from us by gilded ropes, was a multitude of extraterrestrials. Some I recognized from the images I'd seen on the screens of the docking saucer's reception area, but most were . . . well, alien. They regarded us with eyes slitted, multifaceted, and cyclopean, raised on stalks or recessed deep within skulls; antennae switched in our direction, and elephantine ears swiveled toward us. Fur and exoskeletons, stalk-like legs and wormy tentacles, mandibles and sucker mouths, pincers and claws, pads and pods and hooves . . . the denizens of a score of worlds, turning as one to study the handful of strangers who'd come among them.

The cacophony of voices—chirps, clicks, burbles, grunts, hisses, and howls—that had echoed across the enormous room fell away as we made our entrance, until we found ourselves surrounded by an eerie silence. Ted was leading us; he stopped at the end of the aisle, and it was clear that he didn't have the foggiest notion what to do next. Nor did the rest of us; we looked at each other uncertainly. Should we kneel and bow? Raise our hands to show that we'd come unarmed? Try a little bit of the old soft-shoe? Nothing had prepared us for this moment.

The crowd to our left suddenly parted, allowing two familiar figures to

approach us: Jas and Fah, neither one wearing environment suits but instead dressed in ornate robes. They walked down the aisle until they stopped a few feet away; then, as one, they raised their hands in the hjadd gesture of welcome.

"Greetings and salutations," Jas said, hisher native tongue translated into Anglo by the device around hisher neck. "Welcome to the *Talus caan-saah* . . . the Great Hall of the Talus."

"Thank you." Ted raised his right hand; the rest of us did the same. "As Captain of the Coyote Federation ship *Pride of Cucamonga*, I'm pleased to . . ."

Fah made a sharp, cough-like grunt that couldn't have been anything except a protest, as from all around us came a low resumption of the same voices we'd heard only moments before. Jas's fin rose slightly, and he stepped closer. "They cannot understand you unless you use your translator," heshe murmured, then heshe reached to Ted's mask and gently pressed the small button. "Now you may speak."

"Oops, sorry." As he spoke, Ted's amplified voice boomed across the enormous room, followed an instant later by its translation into dozens of extraterrestrial tongues. This time, the audience response was louder, and there was no mistaking their amusement. The first words of a human to the collective races of the Talus: *oops, sorry*.

Ted's face went as red as the patterns of his sha. Before he could try again, though, Morgan stepped up beside him. "Thank you, Prime Emisary Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda of the hjadd," he said smoothly, raising his left hand while assaying a perfunctory bow. Once more, the Great Hall fell silent. "As leader of the first trade delegation from the human world of Coyote, Morgan Goldstein humbly accepts the invitation of the Talus, in hopes that this meeting leads to peaceful and profitable relations between its worlds and our own."

Nice speech, albeit a bit presumptuous. Even as its translation echoed through the caan-saah, Ted gave Morgan a sharp look. Perhaps Morgan had come to his rescue, but Ted was obviously irritated at having been upstaged. Morgan just smirked; after all, he'd spent more time with the hjadd than anyone else, even Ted and Emily, and thus knew the proper protocols.

"We recognize you, Morgan Goldstein of Coyote, along with your companions." Fah's fin had laid down flat against hisher skull; apparently heshe was no longer miffed. "The Talus welcomes your delegation, and hopes as well that this first meeting will result in a long and prosperous relationship."

From all around us, dozens of voices rose at once, as the aliens gathered within the amphitheater spoke in unison. I had no idea what they were saying, but I couldn't help but grin. Okay, everything was hunky-dory. We weren't about to be tortured or dissected or enslaved; thanks to my good and dear friend Morgan Goldstein, I was now an honored guest of the Talus.

"Yippie-yo ky-yay," I muttered. "Let's party."

Rain was standing next to me. She quickly raised a finger to her mask, silently shushing me. I shrugged. My translator wasn't activated, and I hadn't spoken loud enough to be heard by anyone else. But again, from the corner of my eye, I caught the worried look on Ash's face.

Neither Jas nor Fah seemed to notice. "A place of honor has been reserved for you," Jas said, extending a hand toward the center of the room. "If you will be so kind, we will take you there."

"Thank you, Prime Emissary." Ted was not about to let Morgan steal the limelight again. "As captain of the Coyote Federation ship *Pride of Cucamonga*, I accept your hospitality on behalf of my crew."

As we followed Jas and Fah toward the dais, the swarm of voices resumed its former volume. Countless alien faces stared at us from either side of the aisle . . . and just beyond the ropes, something that looked like a cross between mardi gras and a Texas hoedown was underway. Now that they had dispensed with the necessary formalities, the members of the Talus were going back to what they'd been doing before we showed up. From here and there within the crowd, fumaroles of fragrant incense rose in the air, while shimmering white balls floated overhead, serving no purpose that I could perceive except to be pretty. A quartet of hairy arachnids pounded upon an array of drums, supplying the music to which several bipedal giraffes performed an intricate dance. A pair of blue-skinned, four-armed beings, as skinny as ballerinas but with heads like giant bananas, juggled luminescent gold batons, tossing them back and forth to each other to form complex airborne patterns. There was a hideous caterwaul, and I looked around to see an enormous creature that looked like a yeti pounding its fists against its barrel chest; several white balls shot toward it, and the yeti abruptly calmed down.

"Oh, man," Doc said quietly. "Haven't seen anything like this since my nephew's bar mitzvah."

That made me laugh so hard, I doubled over, clutching at my stomach. Everyone stared at me, and even Jas turned his head upon his long neck. Rain grabbed my shoulders, pulled me upright. "What's gotten into you?" she whispered, her voice low and urgent.

Ted fell back a couple of steps. "Cut it out!" he muttered angrily. "This isn't the time or place!"

"I know, I know . . . sorry." Yet I couldn't wipe the grin off my face. Everything was so ludicrous, so surreal, that it was nearly impossible to take any of it seriously. Fifty-four light-years from home, and what did I find? The biggest party in the galaxy, with everyone wearing the damndest costumes I'd ever seen. I took a deep breath, shook my head in an effort to clear it. Ted gave me a warning glare, then moved back to the front of the line.

We reached the end of the aisle, where six chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle facing the dais, upon which stood a large, throne-like couch proportioned to hadd contours. Jas and Fah took up positions on either side of us; they waited patiently while we took our seats, yet I noticed that their eyes kept swiveling toward an elevated runway leading to the throne from a door off to the right. Obviously they were expecting someone.

Yet that wasn't what got my attention. Perched on the left armrest of my chair was a gnosh, identical to those I'd packed aboard the *Pride* earlier that day. Whether it was supposed to be a party favor or merely a decoration, I didn't know, but nonetheless I was delighted to find it.

I wrapped my hand around its delicately curved shaft, and ecstasy

flooded through me. If I'd been in a happy frame of mind before then, now I was positively delirious. You could have hit me over the head with a ball-peen hammer and I would've only giggled. Pure joy, unbridled and without end, was at the center of my personal universe; so swept up in pleasure was I that it only barely occurred to me that no one else in our group was touching their own gnoshes.

"Jules." Rain was sitting beside me, yet her voice sounded as if it was being transmitted from some planet many parsecs away. "Jules, snap out of it. You're . . ."

The long, loud toll of a gong, and once again everything went quiet as all eyes turned toward the runway. A door opened at the side of the amphitheater, and two dozen hjadd, wearing armor that vaguely resembled that of ancient Romans, entered the room. Carrying staffs from which dangled ribbon-like flags, they marched in perfect cadence until, two at a time, they took up positions on either side of the runway. Raising their staffs above to shoulder height, they unfurled their flags, then stood at stiff attention.

"All rise for the *chaaz'braan*!" Jas commanded.

At a loss for what else to do, we stood up from our seats, gazed toward the door. The Great Hall had gone silent, yet from two seats to my left, I heard Morgan's quiet voice. "The *chaaz'braan*," he whispered to no one in particular. "Spiritual leader of the Talus. Sort of a holy man, if you could call him that. He's. . ."

He abruptly went quiet as the gong sounded once more, and then the *chaaz'braan* entered the room.

I don't know what I was expecting—the Pope, maybe, or perhaps the Dalai Lama—but that wasn't what I saw. What came through the door was something that looked like a bloated and incredibly ancient bullfrog. Swaddled in heavy robes of crimson and gold whose train dragged behind him, he lurched forward on thick, bipedal legs, his shoulders bowed by the weight of years. Rubbery jowls fell from either side of a broad, thick-lipped mouth, and sparse white hair hung limp from a flat, slightly ridged skull, from which two deep-set eyes—one half-closed and slightly askew—gazed straight ahead in what appeared to be an expression of senile boredom.

As the *chaaz'braan* slowly approached the throne, it suddenly occurred to me that this was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. So this was the High Hoodoo of the Talus. If he'd been a bit smaller, I could have stuck him in a terrarium and fed him house flies. Almost as if to confirm my impression, his mouth lolled open, and a long tongue spilled out for a moment before disappearing again, leaving behind a moist tendril that drooled from his lips.

Feeling an uncontrollable urge to crack up, I quickly raised a hand to my mouth. Yet I was too late to keep from laughing out loud. In the silence of the Great Hall, it sounded like someone busting a gut during a funeral . . . which made it even more ridiculous.

Rain grabbed my arm. "Shut up!" she snapped, no longer trying to be quiet. "You're going to. . .!"

But the damage was done. The *chaaz'braan* had heard me. Stopping

just short of his throne, he slowly turned to regard me with a wall-eyed stare that was both wise and moronic at the same time. And, indeed, everyone else in the Great Hall seemed to be watching me as well. My crewmates, Jas and Fah, the hjadd honor guard, the hundreds of extraterrestrials gathered around us . . . all had turned to see what was going on with the impetuous young human who'd brayed in the presence of the holiest of holies.

"Sorry . . . I'm so sorry." I gazed back at the chaaz'braan, trying to show the proper respect yet still incapable of hiding my grin. "My apologies, your worship . . . your highness . . . your frogginess, or whatever . . ."

"Jules!"

Ignoring Rain, I stepped forward, approaching the dais with my hands outstretched. "No, really . . . I mean it. I'm just some poor goof from Earth . . . hell, two weeks ago, I was a stowaway . . . and now, here I am, face to face with the greatest . . . um, toad, I guess . . . in the entire galaxy."

Ted tried to grab my arm and pull me back, but I was on a roll. Slipping free of his grasp, I continued walking toward the chaaz'braan. "So I'm absolutely, completely, totally overwhelmed," I babbled, making my way up a short flight of steps to the dais. "This is a real honor, your . . . um, whatever they call you back in the pond . . . and I just want to say that me and my friends are happy to be here, and thanks for all the paperweights, and . . ."

By then, I'd reached the top of the dais. The chaaz'braan was only a few feet away; his one good eye peered at me with what seemed to be amusement, as his mouth stretched open to allow his tongue to loll forward again.

"Well," I finished, "I promise I won't eat your legs."

I was about to wrap my arms around him in what I meant to be a brotherly hug when, all of a sudden, the small airborne balls I'd seen earlier swooped down upon me. They circled me like the electrons of an enormous atom, preventing me from getting any closer to the chaaz'braan. Annoyed by their interruption, I raised my hands to swat them away.

One of them touched the back of my left hand, and that was it. I was out like a light.

FOURTEEN

The morning after . . . the frog-god is amused . . . truth and consequences . . . an act of atonement.

IX

Exactly how long I was out of commission, I couldn't know. What I did know for certain is that, when I woke up on the sofa in the library, it was with the worst hangover of my life. Which isn't saying much, because I'd never been a heavy drinker. If this was what Ash had to deal with every time he went on a bender, though, it was enough to make me vow then and there never to get smashed again.

But . . . I hadn't been drunk. The last thing I recalled was raving at the chaaz'braan; then little glowing balls swarmed in upon me. Up until that point, my behavior had been erratic, to say the least, but I could've sworn in good faith that neither grain nor grape had passed my lips. And if not, then why did my brain hurt so much and my eyes feel as if they'd been rubbed with sandpaper?

Rolling over on the sofa, I looked up to find Rain gazing down at me. The expression on her face wasn't pleasant; she'd changed out of her sha, but I didn't need its patterns to tell me her mood was black.

"Umm . . . hey there," I muttered. "What happened?"

"I don't know. You tell me." Despite her anger, her voice was gentle, genuinely concerned. She reached over to a side table, picked up a glass of water. "Here. Drink this."

I managed to sit up enough to take the glass from her without spilling it. Even that, though, was sufficient to make my skull feel as if it was ready to explode. But my mouth tasted like a sandbox, and a drink of water was worth the pain. "Thanks," I gasped once I'd quenched my thirst. "Where . . . I mean, how did I get back here?"

"We carried you. Hold on a sec." Rain was wearing her headset; she tapped its lobe and murmured something I didn't quite catch. "Everyone's in bed," she continued, "but the skipper said he wanted to be awakened as soon as you came to."

"So you've been up with me all night?" She nodded, and I glanced at my watch. A quarter to seven, by the ship's clock. "Thanks. I appreciate it . . . and the lift back, too."

"Yeah, well . . ." Rain pushed my legs aside so that she could take a seat at the other end of the sofa. "You're lucky we were able to get you out of there. The hjadd . . . Fah in particular . . . wanted to take you into custody for what you did back there. Fortunately, Morgan interceded on your behalf, and, well . . ."

"Wait a minute." Holding up a hand, I struggled with my memory. Lots of holes there that needed to be filled. "What *did* I do back there?"

She stared at me. "You mean you don't remember?" I started to shake my head; it was too painful to do so, but she got the idea. "God, Jules . . ."

"I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

"No . . . *we're* in trouble," Ted said. "You're just the guy who got us there."

I hadn't heard the door of his room open and shut; when I looked up at the gallery, though, I saw the captain heading for the stairs, with Emily behind him. Like Rain, they were back in their own clothes. Realizing that I was still wearing my sha, I suddenly wanted to get out of it; the robe felt filthy, as if I'd done something embarrassing while wearing it. Which apparently was the case.

"Next time I give you an order," Ted went on as he came down the stairs, "you damn well better listen to me." He nodded toward the table where the food the hjadd had brought us still lay. "And that includes skipping a free meal."

Ouch. So they'd figured it out. But still . . . "I don't understand. Are you telling me it's something I ate?"

He and Emily stopped at the bottom of the stairs, looked at each other.

"All right," Emily said, walking over to pick up the plate of spice cakes I'd sampled, "we already know you had some of these. What I don't know is, how many?"

It took me a second to refresh my memory. "Two, I think . . . no, three."

"Three? You're sure about that? Not four or five?" I forced myself to nod again, and she sighed. "Three. Wow. They must be loaded to do that to someone."

"Loaded with what? I don't . . ."

"Marijuana. The same stuff we brought with us." Emily held up one of the cakes. "Jas tells us they're called *saqis*. A delicacy, intended as dessert. They're usually made with a native herb found on their own world, but it's only in recent years that the hjadd have learned that cannabis is a fine substitute. Apparently they decided that we'd like to find out how they cook with it."

"But if . . ." I was confused. "Look, if they knew that these things would have that kind of effect on us, then why did they. . . ?"

"That's just it. They didn't know." She dropped the saqi back on the plate, brushed her hands clean against her trousers. "Cannabis is no more potent to them than coffee is to us, which is why they enjoy it so much. But with humans, particularly in large concentrations . . ."

"It's not entirely your fault." Ted settled into a nearby armchair. "You didn't know what you were getting into. And I should've realized what was going on when you started behaving oddly even before we walked into the reception."

"It wasn't just those things." Now that my head was beginning to clear, my recollection of the night was starting to come back to me. "I was just feeling a little goofy going into the hall. But when I touched the paper-weight . . . the gnosh, I mean . . ."

"Oh, crap." He closed his eyes. "That just made it worse, didn't it?"

"Uh-huh. You could say that." The longer I was awake, the more I was able to remember . . . and none of it was good. "Did I really tell the . . . what do they call him, the chaaz'braan? . . . that I wanted to eat his legs?"

"Not exactly, but close enough." A wan smile from Rain. "At least you lucked out in one way . . . you didn't switch on your translator. The only ones besides ourselves who understood what you were saying were Jas and Fah. So it could've been worse."

"Oh, good . . ."

"Sorry, but you're not off the hook." Ted shook his head. "None of us are. Among the Talus, the chaaz'braan is revered as a religious leader. Almost a prophet. You don't approach someone like that without much bowing and scraping . . . and you were ready to dance an Irish jig with him."

"Actually, I think I just wanted to give him a nice, big hug . . . not that it makes much difference." I paused. "Those globes, the ones that swooped down on me . . ."

"They're called *naya'Talus*, or so Jas tells us." Emily yawned. "Automatic sentries, intended to keep everyone in line. Non-lethal, fortunately, or you wouldn't be here. In fact, it's lucky you got out of there at all. The hjadd honor guard were ready to tote you off to whatever they call a prison before Morgan stepped in."

"That's what Rain said, yeah." I winced with more than physical pain. "I'm so sorry. I can't . . . I mean, hell, I don't believe I . . ."

"But you did," Morgan said. "And now we're going to pay for it."

Great. Just the person I needed to make the morning complete. None of us had noticed Morgan coming down the stairs, but now here he was, wrapping a dressing robe around himself. "Someone make coffee," he growled, less a request than an order. When no one hopped to it, he stared at Rain until she reluctantly rose from the sofa and wandered off to the kitchen. Morgan watched her go, then turned to me. "A fine mess you've put us in. Now I'm going to have to salvage what's left of . . ."

"With all due respect, Mr. Goldstein, it's not entirely Jules's fault." Ted folded his arms together. "If the *hjaad* hadn't brought us a dessert made with cannabis, he wouldn't have been tempted to eat it." He darted a glance in my direction. "Perhaps he should've listened to me, but still . . ."

"Captain Harker, please don't tell me how to run my business." Morgan plainly wasn't in a mood to listen. "What happened last night was inexcusable. Worse than inexcusable . . . it was a disaster. It's only fortunate that I have some pull with these people, or otherwise the lot of us could have been imprisoned on charges of heresy."

"Look . . ." I stopped myself and tried again. "I'm sorry for what I did. I was out of line, and I apologize for that. But since my translator wasn't on, no one except Jas and Fah knew what I was saying. And if that's the case, so far as the Talus is concerned, all I did was make a fool out of myself." I shrugged. "Big deal."

Morgan scowled at me. "Do you seriously believe that's all you did?" he asked, then shook his head in dismay. "No, of course you do . . . you're so dumb."

"Now, that's uncalled for . . ." Emily began.

Morgan ignored her. "The *chaaz'braan* isn't just a religious leader. Among his own people, he's considered to be a deity incarnate . . . or rather *was*, because he's the sole surviving member."

"He is?" I blinked. "How. . . ?"

"Before the destruction of their home world, the *askanta* made sure that the *chaaz'braan* wouldn't perish along with the rest of them." He held up a hand before any of us could ask the obvious question. "It's a long story, and I'm not sure I understand all the details. What little I know, I got yesterday from Fah, as small talk during our negotiations. Suffice to say, though, that the *chaaz'braan* single-handedly managed to preserve that which the *askanta* valued the most . . . their religion. Since then, *Sa-Tong* has been embraced by most of the Talus, with the *chaaz'braan* himself revered as its prophet."

"Like Jesus, you mean," Emily said. "Or Mohammed."

"More like Buddha, I think, but you get the general idea." Morgan looked at me again. "So when you pulled that stunt last night, the Talus didn't need to understand what you were babbling . . . they were offended all the same."

"Then we'll offer a formal apology," Ted replied. "I think some of us did so last night, but it can't hurt to do so again."

Morgan sighed in exasperation. "Yes, we can do that . . . but I'm not sure

how much it will help. One of the main objectives of this mission was to convince the Talus that humankind is mature enough to join them. If they believe we're just a bunch of heathens . . ."

He was interrupted by a bedroom door slamming shut. Everyone looked up to see Ash shuffling across the gallery, heading for the stairs. He seemed to be barely awake, and I assumed that he was hungover again, but before Morgan could continue his harangue, Ash cleared his throat.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "The fix was in from the beginning."

"Pardon?" Emily turned toward him as he walked downstairs. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't think it was an accident that Jules got stoned." For once, Ash appeared to be clear of eye and lucid of tongue; as he came closer, I noticed that the reek of bearshine that normally surrounded him was absent. "Nor was it a coincidence that saqis were delivered here just before the reception. In fact, we were all supposed to eat them."

"Of course we were." Morgan gave him a patronizing smirk. "It's common courtesy of the hjadd to feed one's guests before a formal event, so that they won't be hungry later on. You're not telling me anything I don't know already."

"Morgan—" Ash stared straight at him "—shut up."

This came not as an insult, but as a direct command. Morgan started to say something, then abruptly went silent. Almost as if Ash had said something to him that only Morgan could hear. I recalled a comment Ash had made yesterday, when he'd said Morgan wouldn't fire him because he belonged to the Order of the Eye: *we've got too much on him*. I didn't know what he'd meant by that . . . but apparently Morgan did, because he went as dumb as he'd accused me of being.

"There . . . that's better." As the rest of us glanced warily at one another, Ash went on. "As I was saying . . . maybe it's hjadd custom to send food to guests, but I doubt they were ignorant of the fact that marijuana has a strong effect upon us. Particularly when ingested in large quantities . . . more potent that way. After all, Morgan shipped quite a few pounds to them long before we came here. A sample, so to speak. So they've had plenty of time to study it."

"Well . . . yeah, that's true." Ted rubbed his chin. "But that doesn't necessarily mean they deliberately tried to . . . um, dose us." He paused. "Besides, didn't you tell us that you couldn't read their minds?"

"I can't understand what they're thinking, no . . . but I *can* sense their emotions. So I can tell you that, just as I figured out that Jules was stoned before the rest of you did, I also picked up that Fah was particularly satisfied by his behavior. Jas was appalled, to be sure, but the chaaz'braan was more amused than insulted. . . ."

"He was?" That came as a surprise to me.

"Oh, yes." Ash favored me with a smile. "He had no idea what you were saying, of course, but it helped that you were wearing a sha, and that its patterns showed you to be nothing more than a harmless little chucklehead." He shrugged. "So the chaaz'braan just thought you were funny."

"What a relief," I said dryly.

"Nonetheless, Fah was satisfied by your performance . . . and disappoint-

ed that the rest of us weren't in the same condition." Ash turned to the others. "Again, do you think it's a coincidence that each of our chairs had a gnosh waiting for us? I can't be sure, but I believe that was Fah's idea as well. Sort of stacking the deck . . . trying to make sure that everyone would be good and messed up by then time the chaaz'braan made his appearance."

Morgan coughed loudly, and Ash glanced at him. "Yes, Morgan . . . Fah *does* have a reason to want this mission to fail. Unlike Jas, heshe doesn't like humans very much. I can't tell you why, but what I get from himher is a vague sense of distrust and fear. Heshe would rather see us go away and never return . . . and that's probably why heshe tried to set things up so that we'd embarrass ourselves in front of the entire Talus."

"But it didn't work, because no one except Jules had any saqis." Emily nodded. "Makes sense . . . but why didn't you warn us about Jules?"

"I thought it was just about Jules doing something stupid, that's all." Ash shook his head. "I didn't really put two and two together until we were in the Great Hall . . . and by then, it was too late to do anything about it."

"Well . . ." Ted scratched the back of his head. "Not a hell of a lot we can do about it now. What's done is done. All we can do is offer apologies, then pack up and go home."

He stood up, stretched his back, then headed for the stairs. Rain was coming down from the gallery, carrying a tray laden with mugs of hot coffee. "Thanks," he said as he took one from her. "I'll call Ali, tell him to prepare the ship for departure. Once we hear from Jas, I think we can be out of here in—" he glanced at his watch "—a couple of hours or so. That okay with the rest of you?"

That was the moment Jas chose to show up.

X

Speak of the hjadd, and heshe appears.

By now, we should have become used to aliens suddenly materializing in our midst. All the same, Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda's arrival was so abrupt that Rain yelped and nearly dropped her tray. A mug toppled over the side and fell to the floor, spilling hot coffee across the carpet. None of us paid attention. If Jas was here, it could only mean trouble.

"I've come to relay a message from the High Council of the Talus," Jas said, without so much as a salutation. *"It has convened to discuss the events of last night, and has settled upon what it considers to be an appropriate decision."*

By then, Ted had recovered himself. Stepping closer to the holo, he extended his hands. "We've been talking it over ourselves. First, I'd like to offer our most sincere apologies for our conduct." He glanced at me, then went on. "Particularly that of my crewman. His behavior was uncouth, and we realize how much it must have insulted the chaaz'braan, along with everyone else who was present at the . . ."

"Be quiet." Jas's fin rose to its full height, a clear sign that heshe was irate. *"Captain Harker, we fully comprehend the nature of this situation. Although there is no question that Mr. Truffaut was rude, the Talus also recognizes the fact that he was not totally responsible for his actions."*

"Then you know about the saqis?" Despite Jas's demand that he remain

quiet, Ted seemed determined to defend me. "If that's the case, then you should also be aware it has a certain narcotic effect upon our people."

"Yes, we do, just as we have come to learn that Hahatahja Fah Tas-Saatja deliberately included saqis with your meal with the intent to subvert the reception." Hisher fin slowly lowered itself as Jas's right eye twitched in my direction. "Fah has been opposed to the hjadd negotiating a trade agreement with your race, in the belief that the Talus should not formally recognize a species that has only so recently achieved interstellar travel."

"Yeah, well, gee," Emily murmured. "Two hundred and eighty years is such a short time."

Ted gave his wife a stern look, but Jas appeared not to have noticed her sarcasm. "As a result, Hahatahja Fah Tas-Saatja has been removed as trade delegate to your people. Heshe will have no further contact with you, and heshe will also be punished in accordance with hjadd law. We offer our own apologies for this unfortunate occurrence."

Morgan coughed again. He seemed to want to say something. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ash nod once in his direction. Apparently that was enough to release Morgan from whatever psychic voodoo spell Ash had put on him, because he stepped forward. "Thank you, Prime Emissary. I hope this incident won't affect any trade agreements our races may . . ."

"Be quiet." Jas's left eye rotated toward him, and Morgan reluctantly shut up again. "Nonetheless, a grave insult has been made, not only to the dignity of the chaaz'braan, but also to the Talus as a whole. Regardless of the causes, there are many within the High Council who have come to believe that humankind is not mature enough to conduct trade or cultural exchanges with other races, and that it may be in our best interests to isolate ourselves from your species."

Morgan's face went pale. "Prime Emissary, please . . ."

Jas's throat sacs bulged, hisher eyes becoming narrow as they turned once more toward Morgan. "Do not interrupt me. I have not finished." Ted glared at Morgan, and he went silent. "I have spoken on your behalf, explaining to the High Council that your party was insufficiently indoctrinated to the customs of the Talus, including proper social protocols within the Great Hall. After great deliberation, the High Council has decided to give humankind another chance . . ."

"Thank you," Ted began. "We appreciate . . ."

" . . . provided that you make amends."

Oh, crap, I thought, here it comes. I found myself remembering the dire fate that I'd imagined awaited me within the Great Hall. The rack, the cat o' nine tails, the iron maiden . . . the hjadd must have some way of dealing with heretics.

"The Talus has a task we wish for you to perform," Jas continued. "One of great importance that, if successfully completed, will be of great benefit to all the races of the galaxy." Heshe turned toward Ted. "Captain Harker, you are already familiar with one aspect of this assignment, from your earlier encounter with my kind. I am sure that you will remember Kasi-masta . . . what you'd call the Annihilator."

Ted's mouth dropped open. He stared at Jas in shock, stunned by what heshe had just said. "Yes, I remember. What about it?"

"We want you to rendezvous with it, with the purpose of undertaking a scientific survey. Your vessel will be provided with the proper coordinates for a hyperspace jaunt that will take you to a system Kasimasta has recently entered, along with an automatic probe that you will deploy within its estimated trajectory. Once this probe is in place . . ."

"I'm sorry, but the answer is no." Ted shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jas, but I can't do that. My ship is a freighter, not an exploration vessel, and my crew hasn't been trained for this sort of mission. The risk is much too great."

Jas peered at him. *"Captain Harker, I believe you do not fully understand your situation. If you refuse to accept this mission, the High Council will have no choice but to sever all contact between the Talus and your race. That includes diplomatic ties with the hjadd."*

"I understand the situation completely . . . and the answer is still no." He hesitated. "If you wish to return to Coyote, you're more than welcome to join us. No doubt you'll want to break the news to your staff, perhaps even close down your embassy. But I'm not about to put my people in harm's way simply for the sake of atonement."

"You can't do that." Morgan's voice quivered with fury; for a moment, I thought he was going to stamp his feet on the floor. *"The Pride belongs to me. If I tell you . . ."*

"Mr. Goldstein, you may be the ship's owner, but I'm still its captain. When I say we're returning to Coyote, that's exactly where we're going to go. You're just going to have to find another way to make money." Ted looked at Jas again. "My decision is final. Sorry, but that's just the way it is."

Jas didn't respond for a moment, although hiser throat sacs throbbed and hiser fin stood fully erect. *"As you will, Captain,"* heshe said at last. *"I trust that you still intend to depart Talus qua'spah today?"*

"As soon as possible, yes."

"Very well. We have already taken the liberty of refueling your ship and its shuttle."

"Thank you. I . . ."

"I will meet you at your ship in an hour." Without another word, Jas vanished.

"Harker . . ." Morgan began.

"Don't start." Ted held up a hand. "If you want to fire me, I understand perfectly. Perhaps you'll be able to find another captain and crew willing to undertake this mission. But I'm not risking our lives just so that you can corner the market on alien knick-knacks."

Morgan was livid. Hands balled into fists, he took a menacing step toward Ted . . . and stopped when he apparently realized that Harker could paste him across the carpet. "You're making the biggest mistake of your life," he muttered instead. "Better hope you've made plans for early retirement."

"If that means I'll get in a little more fishing," Ted replied, "it beats the hell out of working for you."

Morgan started to say something, but seemed to think better of it. Or maybe he just decided that any further argument was pointless. In any case, as a cold silence fell between them, I took the opportunity to ask a burning question: "Pardon me, but would someone mind explaining what Kasimasta is?"

Ted let out his breath. "I'll tell you later . . . but believe me, it's something we don't want to mess with." He looked at the others. "Right, then. Back to your rooms and pack up your gear. I want us out of here within the hour. Less if possible."

I was about to pull myself off the sofa when a door slammed upstairs. Looking up at the gallery, we saw Doc standing at the railing, peering down at us.

"Scuse me—" he stifled a yawn with his hand "—did I miss something?"

XI

There wasn't much left for any of us to do except stuff our clothes into our duffel bags, so only a half-hour later we were ready to go. One last look around the library to see if we'd forgotten anything, then Ted led us down the corridor to the tram station. The ride back to the saucer was made in silence; no one spoke as our car hurtled through the tubes, but I found myself regretting the way things had gone. I would've liked to have seen more of this place, perhaps on a return trip. Now it appeared that we'd be the last humans to ever lay eyes upon Talus qua'spah . . . and soon, the rest of the galaxy would be closed to us as well.

And it was all my fault.

When we arrived at the gangway, we found Jas waiting for us. Once again, the Prime Emissary was wearing hisher environment suit. I'd become so used to seeing himher in the flesh, it was startling to find myself staring at an opaque faceplate. Perhaps it was just as well. Jas said little to any of us, but instead followed us down the tunnel to the *Pride's* airlock. If heshe was disappointed or angry, it was impossible to tell.

Ali was already on the bridge. He'd been asleep in his cabin when Ted called to tell him that we were making an early departure, so he had gone up to Deck One and initiated the prelaunch countdown. After everyone was aboard, Rain and I sealed the outer hatches, and once everyone stowed their belongings in their cabins, the crew and passengers gathered in the command center. Seating herself at her station, Emily opened a comlink and, in Anglo, requested permission to depart; Jas repeated the same message in hisher tongue, and a minute later we felt a slight jar as the *Pride* was released from its cradle.

Perhaps our leavetaking should have been more eventful, but it wasn't. There was only a cold and unwelcome silence from the com, as if the Talus had turned its collective back on our party: goodbye and good riddance. With Ali gently working the maneuvering thrusters, the *Pride of Cucamonga* glided backward out of the docking bay, and soon the ship was in free space. One last glimpse of Talus qua'spah, then Ali performed a 180-degree turn that put us on a heading for the nearby starbridge.

Once we were underway, Jas floated over to the helm. This time, Ali made no attempt to disguise his loathing for the Prime Emissary; he backed as far away from the hjadd as he possibly could, and watched with disgust while Jas removed hisher glove and planted hisher left hand against the hjadd navigation system. Jas said nothing as heshe slipped hisher key into the slot and entered a code into its keypad, but once he was done, heshe turned to Ted.

"I wish to return to my quarters now, Captain," heshe said. "If you wish to speak to me, you will find me there."

Ted responded with only a nod; his gaze remained fixed on his instruments. Jas hesitated, and for a moment it seemed as if heshe wanted to say something else. But instead, heshe turned away from the console and, using the ceiling rails, pulled himherself over to the floor hatch. Without another word, Jas disappeared down the manhole.

Several people breathed a quiet sigh of relief once heshe was gone. But when I looked over at Ash, I couldn't help but notice that his face was pale. Perhaps he couldn't tell what Jas was thinking, but nonetheless . . . well, he knew something was wrong, even if he was unable to say exactly what it was.

Hjarr fell away behind us as the *Pride* headed toward the hjadd star-bridge. Once the ship was on final approach, Ali slaved the helm to the starbridge AI, then lifted his hands from the console and folded them together in his lap. Everyone cinched their seat harnesses a little tighter; Rain didn't take my hand this time, but I could tell that she was nervous. She felt it, too—a certain sense of foreboding, as if something lay ahead of us that was both unidentifiable and unavoidable.

The silver ring lit up, and the *Pride* hurtled toward it. I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and we plunged into hyperspace.

FIFTEEN

Hot Jupiter fudge . . . four and a half million miles from Hell . . . double-cross . . . the only acceptable option.

XII

One second, we were in hyperspace. The next, we were in trouble.

I knew something had gone seriously wrong the instant the *Pride* emerged from the wormhole, because every major alarm aboard ship seemed to go off at once. Startled, I opened my eyes, only to be blinded by white-hot light that blasted through the windows.

I screamed an obscenity and clapped a hand over my face, but not before a negative afterimage was burned into my retinas. Everyone else was shouting as well, and for several seconds bedlam reigned within the command center. No one was able to make out what anyone else was saying, though, until Ted's voice rose above the confusion.

"Close the shutters! Close the goddamn shutters!"

"I can't find the . . . wait, I got 'em!" Emily managed to locate the button that operated the outside blinds. The intense glare that swept through the bridge suddenly diminished, although harsh light still seeped through cracks at the bottom of the shutters.

"Someone kill the alarms!" Ted yelled. "No, wait, I think I . . .!"

Through the brown haze that blurred within my vision, I saw him searching for the master alarm. The various bells, buzzes, and shrieks abruptly went dead, and I suddenly became aware of a frigid blast

against the back of my neck. Turning around, I nearly caught a faceful of cold halon gas pouring from a ceiling vent behind me. The fire suppression system had automatically kicked in, even though I couldn't see a fire anywhere. But come to think of it, why was the bridge so damn hot. . . ?

"Cut the extinguishers!" Rain was struggling to unclasp her harness; her eyes were squinted half-shut, though, and she evidently couldn't see any better than I could. Someone managed to find the fire control button and the vents clamped shut, but not before everyone seated beneath them had their hair frosted. A moment later, exhaust fans activated, evacuating the remaining gas from the compartment.

"What the hell's going on here?" On the other side of the deck, Morgan's voice rose in outrage. "How . . . Captain Harker, what are you. . . ?"

"Shut up!" Ted kneaded his eyes with his fingertips, trying to clear his vision. "Doc! What's our status?"

"Working on it." Doc was bent over the engineering panel on his side of the console, peering closely at comp readouts. "Ship's okay . . . no hull breaches, all systems still online . . . but I've got outer skin temperature at two hundred four degrees Celsius and climbing." He hastily tapped a command into his keyboard. "Emergency cryonics activated. We can keep the major systems cool, but I don't know how much longer."

"Keep on it." Ted looked over at Ali. "Helm, report . . . where are we?"

"Don't have a fix yet." His reflexes must have been a little quicker than anyone else's because apparently Ali had managed to avoid being blinded by the unexpected glare. "Wherever we are," he added, staring at his screens, "we're not where we're supposed to be."

"No kidding? Really?" Ted let out his breath, then looked up at the flat-screens above the console. All had gone dark, save for the ones displaying data from the ship's comps. "Emcee, can you get us an outside view?"

"Starboard bow cam is fried, but . . . wait a sec, I think the aft and mid-deck starboard cams are copacetic." Emily worked at her console, punching one button after another. "Lemme . . . oh, my God . . ."

An image appeared on the screens, and I felt my heart stop. Filling the screens was an immense sun, bright yellow and burning with all the fires of Hell itself, its surface spotted here and there with the tiny black smudges of solar storms. The cameras had been polarized to the max, but one look at this star and I knew that it wasn't 47 Ursae Majoris.

"Got something on the aft port cams." Emily punched up another image, and now we saw, only a couple of hundred thousand miles away, the bloated sphere of a gas giant. Half of it lay in darkness, with the tiny sparks of electrical storms racing across its night face, while reddish-orange cloud bands slowly moved across its daylight side. Whatever this planet was, it obviously wasn't Bear or any other world in the 47 Uma system.

"Hold that picture!" Ali's hands raced across his keyboard. "I can use the background stars to get a fix on our position."

"Skin temp still rising." Doc had remained calm until now, but his voice had gained an edge. "And don't even ask about radiation levels." He glanced up at Ted. "If we don't find some shade real soon . . ."

"Wait a sec . . . okay, I got it!" Ali tapped another command into the comp, and a miniature solar system materialized within the holo tank. "HD

217014 . . . 51 Pegasi, approximately seventy-five light-years from Rho Coronae Borealis, eighty-two light-years from where we should be." He nodded toward the gas giant on the screen above him. "That's its closest planet, 51 Peg-A, approximately point oh-five A.U.'s from its primary . . ."

"Oh, Christ!" Emily exclaimed. "A hot jupe!"

I didn't have to ask what she meant by that. A hot Jupiter is a jovian planet whose orbit, over the course of millions of years, has gradually become unstable to the point that it begins to spiral inward toward its star. Because of the way they perturb the motions of their primaries, hot jupes were among the very first extrasolar planets discovered by astronomers, way back in the twentieth century. Although freakish in nature, the galaxy is full of them.

"How the hell did we. . . ?" Ali looked over at Ted, his face writhing in fury. "Jas. I told you you couldn't trust that turtle-faced . . ."

"Must be a mistake." Ted wiped a hand across his forehead, dislodging tiny beads of perspiration. The command center was getting warmer by the second; everyone's clothes were becoming damp with sweat. "Never mind that now. Where's the starbridge . . . the one we came through, I mean?"

"Should be . . ." Ali tapped at his console, and a tiny ring appeared within the holo tank, positioned in orbit around 51 Peg-A. "There. About three hundred kilometers behind us." He shook his head. "Why the devil would anyone put a starbridge here. . . ?"

"I don't know, but that's not my concern just now. We need some breathing room while we figure out what's going on." Ted pointed to the jovian. "Think you can adjust course to put us in orbit around the night side, but still stay close enough to the starbridge that we don't lose it?"

"It'll be tricky, but . . . yeah, I can do it." Ali's brow furrowed as he began to plot a new trajectory. "That's providing, of course, that we can go back the way we came."

Ted didn't respond. He glanced across the console at Doc. The chief didn't say anything either, but the look on his face spoke volumes. The *Pride of Cucamonga* was a good ship, but it was old all the same, and it had never been designed to fly this close to a star. If something wasn't done soon, its instruments would begin to melt down; before then, everyone aboard would be broiled alive.

"Emily . . ." Ted began.

"I'm paging Jas." Already one step ahead of her husband, Emily clasped a hand against her headset as she murmured something into her mike. A pause, then she looked up at Ted. "I've got himher."

"Put Jas on open channel." Ted touched his headset lobe. "Prime Emisary, this is Captain Harker. We have a problem here . . ."

"Yes, Captain, I am aware of the situation." Like everyone else in the command center, I heard Jas through my headset. Hiser voice was ethereally calm, as if nothing unusual had happened. "*I have been expecting you to call me.*"

Ted's eyebrows rose. "If you're aware of this, then you must also know that the ship is not where it should be. I assume that a navigation error has occurred. . . ."

"No, Captain, there has not been an error. Your ship has emerged from hyperspace precisely where I programmed my key to take it . . . the star system you refer to as 51 Pegasi."

For a second, no one spoke. Everyone on the bridge stared at each other in complete and total shock, unable to believe what we'd just heard.

Morgan was the first to react. "Damn you, Jas!" he yelled, the knuckles of his hands turning white as he gripped the armrests of his chair. "What the bloody hell. . . ?"

"I told you! I told you he couldn't be trusted!" Ali reached for the hjadd navigation system. "That's it! I'm overriding this damned thing, right now!"

"Stop!" Stretching against his harness, Doc swatted Ali's hands away from the helm. "Don't touch it, or we'll never get out of here!"

"Stand down!" Ted wrapped a hand around his mike. "Everyone, just cool it!"

An absurd order, considering that we'd just been thrown into an oven, but no one laughed. Ted waited until he was sure no one else was about to do anything rash, then released his mike. "Jas, what are you doing?"

"I am in my quarters, praying for my soul and those of you and your crew." As before, the Prime Emissary was strangely at ease, as if resigned to our fate. *"With fortune, our demise will be quick and relatively painless."*

I swore under my breath. Rain's hand closed around my own; glancing at her, I saw only terror in her eyes. We were about to die, no question about it.

"However," Jas continued, *"there is one way this can be averted. Captain Harker, will you please meet with me in my quarters? I have to discuss our new mission with you."*

"Our new mission . . ." Ted took a deep breath, slowly let it out. "The Annihilator. You're committing us to that, aren't you?"

"The choice remains your own. Please come down here to meet with me." A pause. *"Please bring Mr. Truffaut with you. This concerns him as well. No one else may come."*

My heart stopped when I heard my name. Around the bridge, everyone looked in my direction. Ted glanced at me, and I forced myself to nod.

"We'll be there soon." Ted ran a finger across his throat, signaling Emily to break the comlink. "All right, then . . ." He unbuckled his harness, pushed himself out of his seat. "Ali, get us in that new orbit. Doc, Emcee, do what you can about holding the ship together. Jules, you're with me."

My hands were clammy with sweat as I fumbled with my harness. Suddenly, the last thing I wanted to do was pay another visit to Jas's cabin. No choice in the matter, though. One last look at Rain, then I followed the captain to the access shaft.

XIII

When Ted and I cycled through the airlock into Jas's quarters, we found the Prime Emissary waiting for us, his feet anchored to the floor. Although Jas still wore his environment suit, he had removed his helmet. It was obvious that Jas was just as agitated as we were; his fin stood upright and his eyes twitched back and forth, nervously assessing us.

And that wasn't all. As we floated into the compartment, Jas raised

hisher left arm and pointed it straight at us. Wrapped around hisher wrist was something that looked like an oversized bracelet, except that it had four narrow barrels that looked uncomfortably like those of a pistol. Obviously a hjadd weapon of some sort.

"Halt," Jas demanded. "Come no closer, or I will shoot you."

Ted settled the soles of his stickshoes against the floor. "This isn't a good way to open a dialogue, you know." His voice was muffled by his air mask, but I could hear the anger in it all the same. "Especially among friends."

"After what I have done, I doubt that you still consider me to be your friend." As before, the voice that emerged from Jas's translator was different from the croaks and hisses that came from hisher mouth. "There is also the fact that there are two of you."

"You asked for me to come along, didn't you?" Placing my own shoes against the floor, I raised my hands to show that I was unarmed. "See? Nothing up my sleeves."

Apparently Jas didn't get this colloquialism, because hisher head cocked sideways, giving himher the appearance of a curious tortoise that, under any other circumstances, might have been amusing. "Besides," Ted added, "what's the point of us trying to harm you? Without your help, no one gets out of here alive."

"This is true." Jas's fin lowered to half-mast. "I am pleased that you recognize your predicament, Captain Harker. If I do not reprogram my key to the proper coordinates, your ship will not be able to re-enter the starbridge, and we will remain in orbit around this planet until we die."

"I understand this perfectly." Ted paused. "Just out of curiosity . . . why is there a starbridge here? So far as we can tell, this planet is uninhabitable. So's the rest of this system, for that matter."

"My race built it during the period when this world was still in the outer reaches of its solar system. We used it to gain access to one of its outer moons, which was rich with vital materials that we were able to mine, and also to establish an outpost from which our scientists could study the planet's migration. The moon has long since been destroyed, but the starbridge remains intact and operational. It has been seldom used, until now."

"I see . . . and we can't leave unless you insert your key and program it to take us home."

"Correct." Jas's eyes slowly blinked. "Once you agree to my terms and accomplish them, this ship will return to Talus qua'spah, where you and I will report on the outcome of our mission. Once that is done, then you will be allowed to go home."

"Sort of a roundabout way, isn't it?" I couldn't help it; at this point, sarcasm was my best response to his generous offer.

Hisher right eye flickered in my direction. "Mr. Truffaut, if you had not behaved in such a boorish manner, none of us would be here. Indeed, this is not my choice either. But the High Council has demanded atonement for your actions, and since I am the Prime Emissary to your race, it has fallen to me to carry out their wishes."

Ted and I glanced at each other. If Jas was telling the truth, then this wasn't hisher idea. In fact, heshe was caught in the middle, forced by hisher diplomatic position to do the bidding of hisher masters.

"Right, then," Ted said, "so let's hear it. But first—" he nodded toward Jas's weapon—"why don't you put that away? I give you my word, no one aboard will do you any harm."

Jas hesitated, hiser throat sacs inflating for a moment. Then heshe visibly relaxed, and heshe slowly lowered hiser arm. "Thank you, Captain. I apologize for any offense I may have given."

Ted didn't say anything, but instead folded his arms across his chest and waited for Jas to continue. Still keeping an eye on his, the Prime Emissary reached into a pocket of hiser environment suit and produced something that resembled a datapad.

"This is our objective." Holding it out in hiser right hand, Jas flipped open its cover and touched a stud on its side. "Kasimasta, the Annihilator . . ."

A small shaft of light twinkled into being above the pad's surface, then resolved itself into something that I first thought to be a planetary nebula: a bright yellow nimbus, resembling a dust cloud, surrounded by a reddish-orange disc. Yet plasma flares above and below the nucleus told me that this was no infant star, but instead something much more menacing.

"Holy crap," I murmured. "That's a black hole."

Jas's right eye swiveled toward me. "You do not know of this thing?" Again, heshe cocked hiser head as heshe looked at Ted. "Captain Harker, you have not told your crew about this?"

"No, Prime Emissary, I have not." Ted slowly let out his breath. "Most of my people are unaware of its existence. It has remained a secret, known to very few individuals within our government."

"A black hole is classified?" I looked at him askance. "What for?"

Ted shrugged. "Who knows? Most likely it's because . . . well, because governments like to keep secrets, that's all. Maybe they thought people would panic if they knew it was out there." He nodded toward the holo. "Believe me, when Emcee and I first learned about this thing, it gave us the creeps."

"Since you do not know, Mr. Truffaut, I will explain." Jas increased the magnification of the holo, and it slowly swelled in size. "Kasimasta is a rogue black hole, possibly created by the collision of two stellar clusters or dwarf galaxies billions of years ago. When the collision occurred, the intermediate-mass black holes at their centers, which were rotating in different directions, repelled each other, causing the smaller of the two to be

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ejected from the coalescent mass. It spun away at a velocity of four hundred miles per second, and hence began to travel through intergalactic space."

The holo image changed; now we saw a miniature Milky Way, as viewed from some imaginary vantage point above galactic north. A red thread began to trace itself across the image, slowly moving toward the center of the galaxy. "At some time in the prehistoric past," Jas continued, "Kasimasta entered our own galaxy. Since then, it has traveled on a spiral course toward the galactic core, one that has taken it through the outer rim and the Perseus Arm until, several million years ago, it entered the Orion Arm."

"Damn," I whispered. "That puts it right in our neighborhood."

Ted said nothing, but only nodded as he listened to Jas. "During this time, Kasimasta has encountered several star systems. As it has done so, it has destroyed dozens of worlds. Most were uninhabited, but a few were the homes of intelligent races. The taaraq, whose ark Captain Harker's expedition encountered, was one. The askanta, of whom the chaaz'braan was the spiritual leader, was another. The majority, though, did not survive the encounter."

"Hold on." I raised a hand. "Look, I'm no scientist, but I know a few things about black holes, and one of them is that their singularities are actually quite small. Even if this—" I stumbled over the hjadd word, and settled instead for the Anglo translation "—Annihilator is moving from system to system, wouldn't it have to make direct contact with a planet in order to destroy it?"

Jas's head rose upon hisher long neck. "Under normal circumstances, this might be true. However, since Kasimasta is a rotating black hole that doesn't remain in one place, every planet, moon, and even asteroid it has consumed during its long history has contributed to its mass, with a proportionate increase of its event horizon. At the present, we estimate Kasimasta to be nearly ten thousand solar masses in size, with an event horizon more than one hundred fifteen thousand miles in circumference and over eighteen thousand miles in radius."

I let out a low whistle. A monster that big could swallow Earth without so much as a burp. Hell, even Uranus or Neptune could fit into its maw. And I didn't have to ask Jas to know that even a near-miss could be deadly; the accretion disc spinning around the ergosphere of its outer event horizon could exterminate all life upon a planet, while the intense gravitational pull of the hole itself would cause massive solar flares to erupt from any star it passed. No question about it, Kasimasta was a killer.

"Please don't tell me it's on its way toward Earth," I murmured.

Heavy-lidded eyes regarded me with contempt, as if I'd asked a selfish question. "That is of no concern to you," Jas replied. "The Annihilator passed your home system long before your race became civilized." I breathed a little easier, and the Prime Emissary went on. "Nonetheless, it poses a real and present danger to this part of the galaxy. Even as we speak, it is approaching another inhabited system."

Again, the holo image changed. Now we saw a schematic diagram of a star system, with a large gas giant in its outer reaches and a couple of terrestrial-size planets orbiting closer to its sun. "This is the star you know as HD 70642," Jas continued. "It is located one hundred thirty-six-

point-six light-years from our present position. Its second planet, Nordash, is home to a starfaring race known as the *nord*."

As heshe spoke, a thin red line appeared within the system's outer edge, slowly moving toward the superjovian. "Kasimasta has recently entered this system," Jas continued. "In four days, its course will bring it very close to the gas giant, Aerik, where it will consume Kha-Zann, a large moon in orbit around it. Although the Annihilator will not encounter Nordash, nonetheless the nord are evacuating as many of their people as possible, in expectation that its passage will precipitate a planetary catastrophe."

"Smart thinking." I nodded. "I wouldn't want to . . ."

"Be quiet." Once more, the holo changed, and now we saw a close-up of Aerik's satellite system. "The Talus has decided that this event, as unfortunate as it may be, represents an opportunity for us to gather precise information about Kasimasta. For this purpose, the hjadd have designed and built a robotic probe that can be deployed upon a planetary surface. This probe, once activated, will relay scientific data via hyperlink until the moment of its destruction."

"Right . . ." Ted hesitated. "Let me guess. You want this probe deployed on the moon that the Annihilator will consume."

"This is correct."

"And, of course, you've found the perfect candidate for the job of putting it there."

"You have made the correct assumption."

"Uh-huh. And this probe . . . it wouldn't already be aboard, would it?"

Jas's head weaved back and forth. "It was placed within the cargo hold of your shuttle earlier today, while Mr. Youssef was still asleep." When heshe said this, I shook my head. Doc wasn't going to like that one bit. "We did so in the belief that you would undertake this mission voluntarily," Jas went on. "Unfortunately, since you refused to do so . . ."

"You didn't bother to tell us until now." I sighed. "Great. And I get to be the guy who carries it down there."

"Jules . . ." Ted shot me a look, and I clammed up. "You realize, of course, that this makes the job even more hazardous. Why can't we simply drop it to the surface from orbit?"

"Some of its instruments are intended to register and record seismic activity leading up to Kha-Zann's disintegration. Because of this, the probe is designed to be carefully placed on the surface. Otherwise, it is a very simple procedure. All Mr. Truffaut will need to do is unload the probe, carry it a short distance from his craft, and activate it. This should take only a few minutes."

Ted didn't respond. He seemed to think about it for a few seconds, then he looked at me. "Your call," he said quietly. "I can't make you do this, you know."

Of course he could. He was the captain, after all. And even though Morgan had already fired me, I was still a member of his crew. Besides, there were two other people aboard qualified to fly *Loose Lucy*; if I chickened out, either Emily or Ali could handle the assignment. So he was offering me a way out of what could well become a suicide mission.

Yet that was out of the question. I had gotten us into this mess; I had

the moral obligation to get us out of it. Ted knew this, as did I . . . and so did Jas, come to think of it, because there was no other reason why heshe would've summoned me to hisher quarters in the first place.

"Sure . . . why not?" I shrugged, feigning a casualness that I didn't feel. "Sounds like fun."

"Very good." Jas switched off the pad; the holo vanished, and heshe turned to retrieve hisher helmet from where heshe had slung it in a bulk-head net. "Let us then return to the command center, so that I may set course for Nordash."

Heshe paused, then stopped to look back at us. "I am very happy that you have agreed to do this, Captain Harker. I did not wish to die in this place."

"Yeah, well . . ." Ted seemed to be at a loss for words. "I'm not sure you gave us any options."

"On the contrary, I did." A stuttering hiss that sounded like a snake's laughter. "It is only that none of them were acceptable." ○

(CONCLUSION NEXT ISSUE)

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TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) twenty-second year.

Please vote. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover artist, you liked best in the year 2007. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.137-139) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category.

Some cautions: Only material from 2007-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index**. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 1, 2008**, and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Flr., New York, NY. 10016.** You can also vote online at asimovs@dellmagazines.com, but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at www.asimovs.com.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!

BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST COVER:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

SIGNATURE: _____

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

It may be a bit late, but PhilCon's a great weekend getaway for East Coasters. And start thinking about 2008. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

NOVEMBER 2007

16-18—PhilCon. For info, write: Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) philcon.org. (E-mail) info2007@philcon.org. Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton City Center. Guests will include: E. Flint, S. Dawe, K. Roche, A. Trembley. The oldest SF con.

16-18—OryCon. (971) 235-0931. orycon29@gmail.com. Waterfront Marriott, Portland OR. R.C. Wilson, V. & K. Bonilla.

16-18—Fantasy Matters. fantasymatters.org. Minneapolis MN. Academic conference about fantasy.

16-18—Anime USA. animeusa.org. Hyatt Crystal City, Arlington VA (near DC). "Of Otaku, by Otaku, for Otaku."

22-25—EmpiraCon. empiracon.com. Eastern Washington State. SF film and TV, with some written SF and anime.

23-25—LosCon. (818) 760-9234. loscon.org. Los Angeles CA. R. J. Sawyer, artist T. Mather, singer Dr. J. Robinson.

23-25—Darkover. darkovercon.com. Holiday Inn, Timonium MD. Esther Friesner, Katherine Kurtz, Tamora Pierce.

23-25—ChamBanaCon. turkey@chambanacon.org. Hilton, Springfield IL. Very-low-key relax-a-con.

DECEMBER 2007

7-9—SMOCon. smofcon.org. Hilton Boston Logan Airport, Boston MA. Where convention organizers meet to talk shop.

JANUARY 2008

4-6—GAFilk, 890-F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075. gafilk.org. Atlanta GA. Filing (SF and fantasy folksinging).

18-20—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stilyagi.org. Marriott, Troy MI. Westerfeld, Larbalestier, Scalzi.

18-20—RustyCon, Box 27205, Seattle WA 98165. rustycon.com. Airport Radisson. General SF & fantasy convention.

18-21—Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org. Laura Anne Gilman, Marrus.

25-27—VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org. Harvard Univ. Lois Lowry, S. November.

25-27—ConFilk. www.confilk.org. Renton WA. Steve MacDonald, Arlene (Callie) Hills. SF and fantasy folksinging.

FEBRUARY 2008

1-3—COsine, c/o 1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919. firstfridayfandom.org. M. Resnick. SF/Fantasy.

8-10—OwlCon, FW MS-296, c/o OSA, P. O. Box 1892, Houston TX 77251. owlcon.com. Rice U. Gaming, fantasy, SF.

8-10—IkkiCon, Box 1641, Bastrop TX 76602. ikkicon.com. Austin TX. Japanese animation & pop-culture convention.

15-17—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. boskone.org. Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. SF.

15-17—Fairpoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. fairpoint.com. Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Trek, etc.

15-17—KatsuCon, Box 79, Clarksville MD 21029. katsucon.org. Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington DC. Anime/manga.

22-24—SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. shevacon.org. Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. Joe Keener.

22-24—Con DFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. www.condfw.org. Dallas TX. General SF & fantasy convention.

22-24—ConNooga. connooga.com. Chattanooga Choo Choo Hotel, Chattanooga TN. A "multi-genre" convention.

AUGUST 2008

6-10—Dervention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. dervention3.org. Bujold, Whitmore, McCarthy. WorldCon. \$130+.

AUGUST 2009

20-24—Anticipation, CP105, Montreal QE H4A 3P4, Canada. anticipationf.ca. Gaiman, Hartwell. WorldCon. US\$150.

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NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY ISSUE

February: universally known as the shortest month in our year. Luckily, we editors are not the kind to give such a brief month short shrift, and we thus offer our February 2008 issue, chock full of 144 pages of fiction and features you can find only within *Asimov's*. To start things rolling, we present the latest work by popular and award-winning author **Michael Swanwick**, whose latest, "From Babel's Fall'n Glory We Flew . . ." is the kind of story for which the words "inventive" and "dazzling" were thought up. A diplomatic party's sole human survivor, caught in a savage, violent world with only his envirosuit's AI as aid, must form an uneasy truce with an inhabitant of that world. There's a catch: the inhabitant happens to be a giant sentient millipede whose social system is based upon trust. Can any human (let alone a diplomat) be trusted? Read and find out!

ALSO IN FEBRUARY

Of course, this is simply the beginning. Veteran writer **Nancy Kress** returns with a brief confection describing the universe in its simplest terms, a tale of pure "Sex and Violence"; **James Alan Gardner** returns to these pages after too long an absence with his charming and deft story of what would *really* occur if you happened to come across an alien superweapon in "The Ray-Gun: A Love Story"; **Mary Rosenblum**, one of the field's finest scientific extrapolators, offers her story describing the inevitable effect when "The Egg Man" comes to town (no penguins singing Hare Krishna, we promise); **Edward M. Lerner**, stalwart *Analog* contributor, makes his *Asimov's* debut with "Inside the Box," a chilling take on a certain famous feline; Nebula winner **John Kessel** returns with a controversial look at what "The Last American" might be like; and **Allen M. Steele's** *Galaxy Blues* comes to its shattering conclusion: can they survive a malevolent black hole in the journey to "The Great Beyond"?

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

In his "Reflections" column, **Robert Silverberg** attains a very special kind of "Toilet Nirvana" courtesy of Japan's engineers; **Paul Di Filippo** offers a king-sized "On Books" (we had to omit the column this month due to space concerns); plus an array of pleasant poetry by many of your favorite poets. Look for our February issue at your newsstand on December 25, 2007. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, (www.asimovs.com)—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

COMING SOON

stories by **S.P. Somtow**, **Neal Barrett, Jr.**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Carol Emshwiller**, **Nancy Kress**, **Elizabeth Bear**, **Tom Purdom**, **Steven Utley**, **Jack Skillingstead**, **Brian Stableford**, **Robert Reed**, and many others!

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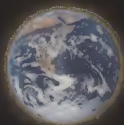
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